



FACTS

FOR OLDER CONSUMERS

National Consumer Law Center®

SAVING ENERGY AND REDUCING HOME ENERGY BILLS WHILE STAYING COMFORTABLE

Home energy bills – for heating, hot water, cooking, air conditioning, lighting and appliances – are placing an increasing burden on all American families. Older Americans in particular face unique burdens. Many elders live on fixed incomes and are especially at risk for *hypothermia* if heating bills become too much to pay in the winter. Elders are also at special risk of *hyperthermia* (heat stroke) if the household doesn't have enough money to pay for adequate air conditioning in the summer. Not being able to pay the utility bills can lead to serious medical problems and even death.

Across the country, many energy bills have risen sharply in the last decade, especially for heating oil in the Northeast and for propane, natural gas and electricity in different regions of the country. While individuals may not be able to directly affect these rising energy prices, they can take steps to reduce their energy consumption without sacrificing comfort or putting their physical well-being at risk. Most elderly households spend \$1000 to \$2000 per year on their home energy bills. By learning how to reduce your energy consumption, you may be able to significantly reduce your bills.

Here are some practical steps that older Americans can take to reduce their energy consumption:

Reduce the setting on your water heater.

Many water heaters have an actual temperature setting, and setting yours to 120° Fahrenheit will provide water that is hot enough without wasting energy or running the risk of scalding anyone in the home. If the water heater simply has a warmer/colder-type setting, consider turning the setting down to a lower level that still provides water that is hot enough for washing dishes and taking showers or baths.

Many other appliances have settings that you can adjust without losing the comfort or convenience you need.

For example, refrigerator and freezer settings may be set too cold, with the result that you use more energy than you need to keep foods cold and therefore pay more on your electric bill than is necessary. Dishwashers often have settings to

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control the temperature of the water or to allow you to turn off the automatic drying feature. While it is most efficient to run your laundry machines and dishwashers only with full loads, clothes washers usually have settings that allow you to adjust the water level to the size of the load, which means you can use less hot water on a small load, or to use shorter wash-rinse cycles if the load is small or the clothes are not very soiled. For clothes dryers, make sure you are not setting the timer for more time than is actually needed to dry the clothes.

Incandescent bulbs use as much as four times the energy as compact florescent bulbs.

They also give off a lot of heat in the summer, which can in turn drive up your air conditioning bills. Think about replacing incandescent bulbs with compact florescent bulbs, especially for bulbs that are on several hours each day – for example: ceiling lights in the kitchen, living room, etc. It is worth the time to check with your electric company to see if it has a program to provide these bulbs at a discount. If you haven't tried a compact florescent bulb in a while, the technology has improved, and there are bulbs for most lighting fixtures (lamps, ceiling fixtures, etc.) that are attractive and will provide adequate lighting levels. Compact florescent bulbs generally last longer than incandescent bulbs. They may be most convenient to use in hard-to-access areas such as ceiling lights, because they need to be replaced less frequently. Compact florescent bulbs contain trace amounts of mercury so check to see if your city or town has a recycling program for these bulbs.

Older Americans have major appliances - boilers, furnaces, refrigerators, air conditioners - that are, on average, older than the typical appliance in other homes.

If you have been thinking about replacing an older appliance, or if an appliance fails and you have to replace it, consider buying an "Energy Star"-rated appliance. The Energy Star rating means that the appliance has met energy efficiency guidelines developed by the US Environmental Protection Agency and the US Department of Energy. Even if the initial purchase price is a little higher than a less-efficient model, it could cost you less to own and operate the appliance in the long run, because of the money saved through reduced energy bills. "Energy Star"-rated appliances are clearly labeled as such, and sales personnel where you purchase your appliance can help you understand the ratings and the estimated energy savings.

Ask your utility company whether your rates are lower in off-peak hours, and if so, schedule your use of your high energy appliances during those times.

Off-peak hours are those times of day when overall demand for energy is low, in contrast to on-peak hours that are those times of day when overall demand is high. Rates may be much less expensive during off-peak hours, and you can adjust your schedule to operate high energy use appliances such as laundry machines and dishwashers during these lower-rate, off-peak hours. Doing so can help you reduce your utility bills.

Seal the air leaks around drafty doors and windows in your home.

In the winter, air leaks allow cold air to enter the house. In the summer, air leaks can allow hot air to enter. Leaks and drafts decrease the efficiency of heating and cooling your home and increase your costs. Leaky doors and windows can be sealed with caulk and weatherstripping.

Wasting hot water will increase your natural gas, heating oil, or electric bill (depending on how you heat your water).

It is therefore helpful to put in low-flow showerheads and faucet aerators to reduce any unnecessary use of hot water. Insulation for your water heater and hot water pipes can usually be purchased at the local hardware store. This will also reduce your energy bills.

Helpful Tips

Many utility companies have programs that provide rebates or other assistance to customers who buy "Energy Star" appliances and florescent bulbs. It is always worth the time to call your local utility company or state energy office to see if there are any rebate programs or any other incentives in place to help with the purchase of energy-efficient appliances. Additionally, some Energy Star appliance purchases may qualify for a federal or state tax credit.

Low-income customers may be able to get substantial assistance with replacing or repairing old or inoperative furnaces and other appliances from the local agencies that provide fuel assistance (primarily through Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program or "LIHEAP") and help to insulate and weatherize homes (through the Weatherization Assistance Program or "WAP"). To find the LIHEAP agency that serves your area, you can call 1-866-674-6327 or send an email to energyassistance@ncat.org, making sure to include your town/city, county, and state. In many parts of the country, the agency that delivers LIHEAP assistance in your area will also run the Weatherization Assistance Program. Your utility companies and state utility commission can also provide you with the contact information for your state LIHEAP and WAP agencies.

For More Information

If you are interested in more detailed information about how to save energy and reduce your energy bills, the American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy publishes a very useful online guide. Much of the information in this Consumer Facts for Older Americans was adapted with permission from the Consumer Guide to Home Energy Savings: Condensed Online Version (© 2003 American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy). The American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy (ACEEE) is located at 1001 Connecticut Ave. N.W., Ste. 801, Washington, D.C., 20036; website: <http://www.aceee.org>. The ninth edition of the print version of ACEEE's Consumer Guide to Home Energy Savings was published in Fall 2007.



NATIONAL CONSUMER LAW CENTER®
7 Winthrop Square, 4th Floor
Boston, MA 02110-1245

Phone: 617-542-8010
Fax: 617-542-8028
E-mail: consumerlaw@nclc.org
www.nclc.org

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