

Ways To Shrink Your Energy Bills

Spend a little, save a lot, or spend a whole bunch and save even more. Here are 10 ways to shave your energy bills year round.

1. Choke your flue. Your fireplace is terribly made & laughably inefficient. According to the Department of Energy, a lit fireplace sucks about 24,000 cubic feet of furnace-heated air up your chimney each hour. Bonus: It's replaced by cold air that comes in the opposite direction through the same opening, causing your furnace to work extra hard to keep your house toasty. Just remember to turn the thermostat down a little when you use it. Also, crack a window in the room where the fireplace is located & then close the door, so it doesn't suck too much warm air from the rest of the house. Remember to close your damper when it's not in use. Make sure your damper closes tightly. Save even more by installing a programmable thermostat.

2. Add up all those overlooked cracks, gaps, & openings around your windows, doors, plumbing, & wiring, & you may find your house has a hole the size of a Mack truck. Seal it up, & you'll save more than 10% on your heating bills. Start by caulking or weatherstripping around windows. For added comfort, pick up a product such as the 3M Indoor Window Kit at the hardware store. Resembling Saran wrap, the plastic sheet costs about \$20 & can be discreetly stretched over windows using double-sided tape, blow-dried for a tight fit, & peeled off come springtime. It can increase a single-paned window's R-value by up to 90%. Fill in cracks around door frames with caulk, & while you're at it, install a screw-on or adhesive-backed door sweep. Use expanding-foam sealants to fill in larger gaps around plumbing & electrical work, especially where pipes enter your house through exterior walls. Tackle energy suckers in overlooked places, too—like exterior wall sockets & switches. You can block them up using fitted insulation pads. Just unscrew the switch plates & pop the pads into place. Learn how an energy audit can help you detect where fuel costs are flying out the windows & walls.

3. Show your heating system some love. Soot buildup, dusty or poorly lubricated fans, flickering pilot lights, & loose fan belts can add hundreds to your heating costs each year. Getting your furnace tuned up regularly by a heating contractor can do wonders for both your wallet & your overall comfort. Natural gas-powered systems should be serviced every two to three years, while oil-fired units need a tune-up every year, since they burn dirtier. To make your system even more efficient, prevent heated air from leaking into your attic or crawl spaces by sealing ductwork with mastic duct sealant—a nontoxic, paint-on material—or foil-backed tape. Doing so will reduce your home's air leakage & could save you a bundle in heating & cooling bills.

4. Give in to Energy Star. We spend 20% of our electricity bills running our appliances. But we can shrink that number dramatically by replacing them with fridges, clothes washers, & dishwashers that qualify for the Energy Star. Energy Star fridges, available from major manufacturers such as GE & Frigidaire, use half as much energy as those manufactured 15 years ago & 15% less than new non-Energy Star models. Rated dishwashers exceed current federal energy standards by 41%, while Energy Star clothes washers are 40% more efficient than conventional models.

5. Make your attic more cushy. The Department of Energy tells us you can reduce your heating & cooling needs by 30% just by adding a few hundred bucks' worth of new insulation. This is especially true if your house is more than 25 years old, from the time before building codes became more mindful of energy efficiency, & you haven't added any new batts yet. We tend to focus on the attic, but it's also wise to see how much insulation you have in crawl spaces, ceilings, basement walls, & around recessed lighting fixtures (just make sure those fixtures are designed for direct insulation contact). Check that your R-value is right for the climate where you live. In general, R-values should run between R-22 and R-49 in the attic, less in other spots.

6. Consider a pellet stove. It's not getting any cheaper to heat your house with gas or oil. But pellets—well, that's another story. Clean-burning pellet stoves can drastically cut your home heating costs. They look like wood-burning stoves but are fueled by small pellets made from superconcentrated sawdust. Pour them into the stove's hopper, & they're fed automatically into a burn chamber; a fan blows the hot air into your house. There are freestanding models as well as fireplace inserts, which vent through a stainless-steel lining that runs up your chimney.

7. Take cheaper showers. Next time you take a shower, remember this: heating water accounts for up to 11% of our utility bills. If your water heater is more than a decade old, that number could be even greater. Switching it out for a new, more efficient electric storage model could save you 10-20% on heating bills. You might also think about gas & tankless units, which save 30 & 40% on water heating, respectively. And let's not forget solar water heaters. At \$3,500 to \$4,800 installed, they're more expensive than conventional heaters, but they have longer lives (about 20 years) & pay for themselves in energy savings in about half that time. If you're not ready to buy a new water heater just yet, ratchet up your existing unit's efficiency with a water-heater blanket. It costs just \$15 & will save you 4-9% on your heating bills.

8. Find some perfect storm windows. Did you know that 10-25% of your heating & cooling costs might be flying right out your windows? If you're not quite ready to fork out the \$12,000 or more you'll need to put in new, high-efficiency units, then installing storm windows is your best option. Triple-track windows—they hold two glass sash & one screen that slide up and down on separate tracks cost about \$100 each & can reduce heat loss through your existing windows by 25% (even more if fitted over inefficient single-pane windows). They may not be as pretty as replacement windows, but sometimes it's better to feel good than look good.

9. Replace your furnace. If you've tried all of the energy-saving recommendations above but still find your house too cold & inefficient,



then maybe—just maybe—it's time to consider replacing your furnace. The average life span for a gas—or oil-fired unit is 15-20 years. Along with fridges & dishwashers, Energy Star also certifies furnaces from companies such as Bryant, Carrier, & York, among many others. Most are at least 15% more efficient than standard models % can save you up to 20% on heating costs.

10. Sell your house. That is, as long as any new pad you buy is certified by Energy Star. These newly constructed homes meet the performance standards established by the EPA & Department of Energy, consuming 30% less energy than standard homes, thanks to features such as enhanced insulation levels, high-performance windows, air sealing & ventilation, & high-efficiency heating & cooling equipment. If you already have a building plan worked out for your new home, then making the upgrades for Energy Star certification costs just 1-3% more but pays for itself immediately. According to Energy Star, their upgrades add just \$10-\$15/month to your mortgage payment but save you around \$25-\$45/month on your utility bills.