

20 free ways to save energy

An exclusive excerpt from *Consumer Reports*' "Complete Guide to Reducing Energy Costs"

Consumer Reports' "Complete Guide to Reducing Energy Costs" is crammed with ways to cut your energy bills. Some take a little money and effort, such as weatherstripping your windows. Some take a little restraint, such as picking a sedan instead of an SUV. Others require investment, such as choosing the more-efficient refrigerator, even if the price tag is a bit higher. Of course, the best ways to save energy dollars are the ones that take no money and little or no effort. That's what you'll find in this excerpt--20 simple things you can do to start saving money right this minute, without having to reach for your wallet.

As the cost of heating your home and running your car continues to climb, we hope this book will help ease the burden on you and your family. And it's nice to know that saving energy does more than save you money: It helps save resources. Using less energy pollutes less, creates less acid rain, and results in less global warming. Even if you do nothing more than the 20 free things listed here, you will have made a difference in your budget and a difference in the world. Not bad for free.

1. **Wash clothes in cold water.** You might guess that most of the energy used by a washing machine goes into vigorously swishing the clothes around. In fact, about 90 percent of it is spent elsewhere, heating the water for the load. You can save substantially by washing and rinsing at cooler temperatures. Warm water helps the suds to get at the dirt, but cold-water detergents will work effectively for just about everything in the hamper.
2. **Hang it up.** Clotheslines aren't just a bit of backyard nostalgia. They really work, given a stretch of decent weather. You spare the energy a dryer would use, and your clothes will smell as fresh as all outdoors without the perfumes in fabric softeners and dryer sheets. You'll also get more useful life out of clothes dried on indoor or outdoor clotheslines--after all, dryer lint is nothing but your wardrobe in the process of wearing out.
3. **Don't overdry your laundry.** Clothes will need less ironing and hold up better if you remove them from the dryer while they're still just a bit damp. If you are in the market for a dryer, look for one with a moisture sensor; it will be less likely than thermostat-equipped models to run too long.
4. **Let the dishwasher do the work.** Don't bother prerinsing dishes with the idea that your dishwasher will work less hard. *Consumer Reports* has found that this added step can waste 20 gallons of heated water a day. All you need to do is scrape off leftover food. Enzyme-based detergents will help make sure the dishes emerge spotless.
5. **Put your PC to sleep.** Keep your computer and its monitor in sleep mode rather than leaving them on around the clock. You stand to use 80 percent less electricity, which over the course of a year could have the effect of cutting CO2 emissions by up to 1,250 pounds, according to EPA estimates.
6. **Turn down the heat in the winter, and turn down the cool in the summer.** Lower the thermostat 5° to 10° F when you're sleeping or are out of the house. "A 10° decrease can cut your heating bill by as much as 20 percent," says Jim Nanni, manager of the appliance and home-improvement testing department of *Consumer Reports*. And before you put on a cotton sweater to ward off a slight chill from the AC in summer, consider that for every degree you raise the thermostat setting, you can expect to cut your cooling costs by at least 3 percent.
7. **A cold hearth for a warmer house.** A conventional fireplace draws a small gale out of the room and sends it up the chimney. Assuming the indoor air has been warmed by your central heating system, that means your energy dollars are going up the chimney, too. Instead, consider a direct-vent, sealed-combustion gas fireplace. *Consumer Reports* has found that those units have an energy efficiency of about 70 percent--and the sight of the flames is a lot more warming than staring at a radiator.
8. **Lower the shades and raise the windows.** Not at the same time, of course, but your windows and shades are great tools to help moderate temperatures in the home. Because of central air conditioning, we tend to forget these time-tested, traditional ways of making the house comfortable. Shades are particularly helpful in blocking the sun from west-facing rooms in the afternoon. At night, if the forecast calls for cooler temperatures and low humidity, give the AC a rest. Open windows upstairs and down, and use window fans or a whole-house fan.
9. **Put a spin on home cooling.** You can operate a couple of fans with a fraction of the electricity needed for air

conditioning, and their cooling effect may make it possible to cut back on AC use.

10. **Take care of your air conditioner, and it will take care of you.** Your air conditioner will run more efficiently if you clean or replace its filter every other week during heaviest use. Keep leaves and other debris away from the central air's exterior condenser, and keep the condenser coils clean.
11. **Spend less for hot water.** Set the hot water heater at 120° F (or the "low" setting), which is hot enough for most needs. If the tank feels warm to the touch, consider wrapping it with conventional insulation or a blanket made for that purpose. To help conserve the water's heat on its way to the faucets, insulate the plumbing with pipe sleeves; with these, you can raise the end-use temperature by 2° to 4° F.
12. **Think twice before turning on the oven.** Heating food in the microwave uses only 20 percent of the energy required by a full-sized oven. And while the second-hand heat from the oven may be welcome in winter, it can put an added load on your air conditioner in warmer months.
13. **Use the right pan.** When cooking on the stovetop, pick your pan, then put it on an element or burner that's roughly the same size. You'll use much less energy than you would with a mismatched burner and pan. Steam foods instead of boiling. If you do boil, be sure to put a lid on the pot to make the water come to a boil faster.
14. **Read the label.** The EnergyGuide label, that is. When you shop for a new appliance, look for the label that gives an estimate of annual energy consumption. To help you make sense of that statistic, the label also states the highest and lowest figures for similar models.
15. **Dust off the Crock-Pot.** Slow cooking in a Crock-Pot uses a lot less energy than simmering on the stove.
16. **Clean the coils on your refrigerator using a tapered appliance brush.** Your fridge's motor won't have to run as long or as often. In addition to saving energy dollars, you'll prolong the life of the appliance.
17. **Drive steadily--and a bit slower.** Hard acceleration and abrupt braking will use more fuel than if you start and slow more moderately. Keeping down your overall speed matters, too, because aerodynamic drag increases dramatically as you drive faster. If you travel at 65 mph instead of 55, you are penalized by lowering your mileage 12.5 percent. If you get your vehicle up to 75 mph, you're losing 25 percent compared with mileage at 55 mph.
18. **Roof racks are a drag.** Most cars are reasonably streamlined, but you work against their slipperiness if you carry things on the roof. A loaded roof rack can decrease an SUV's fuel efficiency by 5 percent, and that of a more aerodynamic car by 15 percent or more. Even driving with empty ski racks wastes gas.
19. **Stick with regular.** If your car's manufacturer specifies regular gas, don't buy premium with the thought of going faster or operating more efficiently. You'd be spending more with no benefit. Most cars have built-in sensors that adjust the engine timing to the gas in the tank. Even if the owner's manual recommends high-octane gas, ask the dealership about switching to regular.
20. **No loitering.** Don't let the engine run at idle any longer than necessary. After starting the car in the morning, begin driving right away; don't let it sit and "warm up" for several minutes. An engine actually warms up faster while driving. With most gasoline engines, it's more efficient to turn off the engine than to idle longer than 30 seconds.

And if you don't mind spending a few dollars:

1. **A tighter home is a toastier home.** Insulation is your home's first line of defense against the weather, right? Wrong. Before you bulk up with fiberglass blankets, seal the leaks. Inexpensive foam strips and caulking can cut your heating and cooling bills by 5 to 30 percent.
2. **Try do-it-yourself low-E windows.** If your windows don't have a low-E coating, consider applying a self-adhesive film on the glass. This treatment is a lot cheaper than replacing the units, and better-quality films are quite durable.
3. **Use a programmable thermostat.** Roughly half of the typical home's energy bill goes for heating and cooling, according to the Department of Energy. The easiest way to save, short of sweating or shivering, is to use programmable thermostats. They can pay for themselves in about a year.
4. **Switch to those funny-looking fluorescents.** You may not be familiar with compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs), but give them a try. A single bulb can save from \$25 to \$45 over its life. And it's a long life: Manufacturers claim that CFLs last between 5 and 13 times longer than standard incandescent bulbs.

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