

How to save energy and stay cool during a heat wave

14 June 2011, By Alan Heavens

Nature doesn't appear willing to cut consumers a break. Neither does the economy.

Longer, colder winters turn quickly into prolonged, hotter summers. To add insult to injury, it seems to be happening while the cost of energy is skyrocketing.

Recent 90-degree-plus days in the nation's East tested the endurance of even those who thrive on sultry weather. As household electric meters spin at warp speed, how can you rein in [energy costs](#) "and remain as comfortable as possible?"

"My first response would be to add insulation to ensure a well-sealed house, but if homeowners cannot manage it in the middle of a [heat wave](#), I understand," said Ronnie Kweller, a spokeswoman for the nonprofit Alliance to Save Energy in Washington.

A no-heavy-lifting alternative: buying an Energy Star-rated [programmable thermostat](#) for "as little as \$25."

"When the house is empty, the thermostat could be turned up and set to have the temperature drop to more comfortable levels by the time you arrive home," Kweller said.

Just doing that can cut energy expenses by 10 percent, she said, adding that the cost of cooling a house in summer averages about 12 percent of your annual bill.

Most utility companies and energy-efficiency advocates recommend raising the thermostat to 78 degrees when you're home, 85 degrees when you're away. Based on a 2,400-square-foot house, the savings-per-degree equals \$4, according to Georgia Power in Atlanta.

Other fairly easy ways to chill a bit include replacing furnace/air-conditioning filters regularly,

as recommended by the manufacturer; closing blinds, curtains and shades on the sunny side of the house, and using energy-efficient lights that don't produce a lot of heat - or just shutting off the lights when you leave a room.

A variety of sources offer ways to cut costs while staying if not cool, then less hot - for longer-term solutions, you may well have to install that extra insulation, or replace older air conditioners or central-air systems:

Massachusetts utility company NStar, among others, suggests using a ceiling fan in hot weather, to create a cool breeze and keep air circulating.

To get rid of hot air while you're cooking, turn on an exhaust fan; the savings on cooling costs will far outweigh the electricity used by the fan.

Instead of using your oven or stove, which will generate even more heat, fire up the outdoor grill.

Take lukewarm showers and baths to avoid humid air, which holds heat.

Make sure you have the appropriate sized dehumidifier for your home. They can be a big drain on power.

Not all energy-saving measures have to do with keeping comfortable. And some measures require an explanation.

The California Energy Commission's Consumer Energy Center, for example, says that "having lots of food in your fridge keeps it from warming up too fast when the door is open."

"I just checked with a couple of my wise young policy/research colleagues, and it seems that there are two reasons why it's better to keep the refrigerator full when possible," Kweller said. "The solid food itself retains the cold, and the tightly

packed items serve as a physical barrier to the cold air rushing out when the door is opened. and less to the surrounding area.

A corollary to this: letting hot items cool down before placing them in the refrigerator, so it doesn't have to work as hard to cool them.

The California energy center also advises that microwaves use two-thirds less [energy](#) than a stove does.

Dishwashers use less water, some hot, than washing by hand. Letting dishes air-dry saves electricity.

Speaking of washing:

Do laundry in a more energy-conscious way by using the warm or cold water setting. Use cold water to rinse clothes (savings: 4 percent).

Line-dry clothes whenever you can (savings: 5 percent).

When you run the dryer, do full loads, use the moisture-sensing setting, and clean the lint trap after each use (savings: 0.5 percent).

Most new electronics use electricity even when they are switched off. Unplug phones and chargers; turn computers and printers off at the power strip (savings: 1 percent to 2 percent).

"There are so many variables, so that's why we talk about savings up to a certain percentage," Kweller said.

Unplug or recycle that spare refrigerator if you don't really need it. It can save you up to \$150 per year.

Turn your water heater down to 120 degrees Fahrenheit to save even more money on your electricity bill.

When baking, Georgia Power says, avoid opening the oven door, which lets out 20 percent of the heat. Use a timer. When cooking on top of the stove, use pots and pans that match the size of your burners, which brings more heat to the pan

Kweller said she, like many of us, often wonders why, with all the energy-efficient products now available, utility costs continue to increase.

Then again, she added, "Could you imagine what your bill would be like without energy-efficient products?"

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