

# 25 Ways to... Cool Down Your Energy Bills

Just because the weather is warmer doesn't mean you should let your utility bills get you hot under the collar. Taking these simple steps can keep your budget from overheating.

## Chill Out AC Bills

### 1 Match your unit to the size of the room.

If an air conditioner is too large, it will cool down the room and turn itself off before it has removed humidity, which makes a room feel cold and clammy. Air-conditioner manufacturer Amana has a detailed chart on its Web site that assesses your air-conditioning needs based on location and square feet. Go to [www.amana.com](http://www.amana.com).

**2 Buy a unit with programmable controls.** You're actually wasting money by turning your air conditioner off and throwing open the windows when you're not around for a few hours or at night when you go to bed. Air conditioners remove heat, but they also work hard to remove humidity. When the windows are open, you let in moisture that your unit will only have to reduce later, says Larry Kaufman,

principal planner with DTE Energy. With programmable controls, you can use a low setting while you're not home, and program the unit to turn itself up before you walk in the door. At night, just put it on a low setting.

**3 Switch off the central air.** Simply closing the registers in rooms you're not using doesn't save energy since the system still has to cool the air and send it along the vent. It's better to turn off your unit's control valves for those rooms at the base unit or the compressor. Ask your air-conditioner service to show you which valve controls which vent, then mark them with self-adhesive notes or labels. This way, when you're ready to turn them back on, it will be easy to figure out.



**Don't let this summer scorch your bank account**

**4 Replace filters more often.** A clogged system works harder and can overheat, even burn out, the air conditioner, says Mike Kuhn, technical director with HouseMaster, a national home inspection company. He suggests replacing the filter on your window unit once a month. Filters can be found at home improvement stores. If you have central air, clean the evaporator coils once or twice a year.

**5 Clear the pathway.** If you have central air, clear weeds and debris away from your base unit to keep it running efficiently. That also goes for a window unit. And don't forget to check inside, too. Look for drapes, furniture or potted plants blocking the vents. Obstructions—either inside or out—can reduce efficiency by 5 to 10 percent.

## Shut Out The Heat

**6 Caulk it up.** Your house may have small cracks in the walls that let hot air in and cool air out. Look

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for small fractures or fissures around lighting fixtures and windowsills, near the chimney and anywhere plumbing comes into your house. If leaks aren't obvious, find them by holding a candle in front of areas that are suspect. When the flame moves, you've found a problem. Seal these cracks by using caulk. For example, DAP manufactures two such products, which cost about \$2 or \$3 at home improvement stores.

**7 Close fireplace flues.** Just as it lets hot air escape in the winter, an open flue acts as a thief in the summer, robbing your home of cold air.

**8 Install window air conditioners correctly.** According to air-conditioner manufacturer Friedrich, your unit will work up to 10 percent more efficiently when insulated well from the outdoors to minimize hot air leaks. If your insulation strip becomes worn, you can buy another at your local home improvement store for less than \$5.

**9 Check the basement ceiling.** If the floorboards in the ceiling aren't well-insulated, you're wasting \$30 to \$50 a year in heating and cooling costs, according to DTE's Kaufman. You can insulate this area on your own by using inexpensive foam boards (which you'll find at a home improvement store), scissors and a heavy-duty staple gun.

## Keep Cool in The Kitchen

**10 Take the refrigerator out of the garage.** If you have a second refrigerator or freezer in an uninsulated garage, it's probably costing you \$30 each month in electricity costs. Move the unit into an insulated basement or a spare room, and

you'll cut that amount in half because the unit won't have to work as hard. Even better, unplug it completely, using it only when you have a get-together and need to stock up.

## 11 Turn off the automatic icemaker.

Icemakers increase your refrigerator's energy consumption by 15 to 20 percent. Since your refrigerator (depending on its age) accounts for about \$150 of your yearly energy costs, you'll save \$22 to \$30 each year. Try using ice trays.

## 12 Light up your grill.

Although the natural gas in your barbecue isn't that much cheaper than the gas or electricity you use to heat your stove, you'll save on cooling costs by cooking outside. The stove or oven can raise the temperature in your kitchen by as much as 5 to 10 degrees, especially in a non-air-conditioned room—heat that your air conditioner will have to work harder to eliminate.

## Ease Up On Energy

### 13 Examine the electric bill.

Some electric companies charge different rates at different times of the day and week. If yours does, do big energy-consuming chores—running the dishwasher, the clothes washer and dryer, and the vacuum—when rates are lowest.

### 14 Attach dimmers to table lamps.

Dimmers can cost as little as \$5 and their benefits are twofold: You'll cut your energy consumption by up to 50 percent

## Does Your Home Need a Tuneup?

Chances are, you go for a yearly physical. You probably even service your car once or twice a year. So what have you done for your house lately? Kathy Greely, codirector of the Meadville Community Energy Project (MCEP), says you should give your home a heating and cooling checkup every other year.

Your local utility may offer the service for free. To find organizations and companies that specialize in home energy ratings, check out the Residential Energy Services Network Web site, [www.natresnet.org](http://www.natresnet.org). For other ways you can save even more energy and money, go to the Alliance to Save Energy, [www.ase.org/checkup/home](http://www.ase.org/checkup/home), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star program, [www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov), and Home Depot, [www.homedepot.com/energy](http://www.homedepot.com/energy).

and possibly triple the life of your lightbulbs, according to lighting manufacturer Sylvania.

### 15 Purchase a power strip.

By plugging your computer, speakers, printer and monitor into one surge protector, you can eliminate the threat of power surges and also simplify turning off everything at night.

### 16 And turn those lights off.

Leaving the lights on costs you money in two ways, says Harry W. Parker, Ph.D., a professor of chemical engineering at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. You pay once for electricity to light the bulb, but you also pay again to cool down the air in the room it's in. For example, ten 100-watt incandescent bulbs can generate as much heat as a small electric heater. So it's important to turn off

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the lights. It may also be a good idea to switch to compact fluorescent bulbs, which use significantly less energy than regular lightbulbs.

### Take It Outside

**17** **Plant a tree.** By planting shade trees or bushes around

your house, you can lower cooling bills by \$100 to \$250 per year, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. Plant trees on the south and west sides of your property to get the greatest benefit.

**18** **Put reflective film on your windows.** For only a few dollars, the film will keep carpets and upholstery from prematurely fading, and rooms will be 10 percent cooler.

**19** **Put your pool filter on a timer.** Running the filter for 12 hours each day costs about \$29 per month. Using it only on weekends when you're going to swim can save you more than \$20. This is important for hot tubs, too, which can cost around \$12 each month to run. And don't forget to use a solar cover, which helps keep your pool clean and warm.

**20** **Tune up your lawn mower.** It might sound funny, but it's just as important to change the oil, spark plugs and filters on your yard equipment as it is to change them on your car. A tuneup kit costs as little as \$8, but by using it, you'll reduce fuel consumption by up to 30 percent depending on the size of your lawn and the number of times you mow it. Changing these items can also extend the life of your mower by as much as three years, saving you several hundred dollars.

**21** **Attach motion sensors to outdoor lights.**

Lights will come on when someone comes toward your house or you pull into the driveway instead of staying on all the time. Motion sensors are also smart additions in areas, such as basements or attics, that aren't used often. If you forget to turn off the lights, the sensor will turn them off for you.

**22** **Throw away your sprinkler.** Old-fashioned spray sprinklers waste water because no matter how cool it is outside some water is lost to evaporation. You can lower your watering costs by 60 percent if you switch to drip irrigation, a system that delivers water directly into the ground versus spraying it into the air.

### Drive Home The Savings

**23** **Empty the trunk.** Remove unnecessary items from your car and trunk. Extra weight makes your engine work harder, thus wasting gas.

**24** **Don't sit back idly.** You use the same amount of gas starting your car as you do idling for two minutes. If you know you're going to be waiting in your car longer than that, turn off your engine and restart it when you're ready to move.

**25** **Leave the air conditioner on.** If you open your windows, you create drag, friction that makes your engine work harder to move forward. Most cars are more fuel efficient with the air conditioning on. Once it's on, keep the setting on recirculate, so it doesn't have to constantly cool the fresh air coming into the car. **WD**