

Heating and Cooling Your Home for Less



When you think about heating and cooling your home, do you think about energy efficiency? The more efficient heating and cooling systems are, the less they cost to run. That means your utility bills can be lower. Energy efficiency is good for the environment, too. Before you invest in a new system, ask about the EnergyGuide label – it lets you know how energy efficient a model is compared to others like it. Products that meet certain energy efficiency criteria will have the Energy Star logo. Want to save energy but not in the market for a new system? Consider a professional or do-it-yourself home energy assessment, which can show you how specific fixes – like sealing air leaks or beefing up insulation – could help you save energy.

Think “Efficiency”

More than half of the energy use in a typical home goes toward heating and cooling it, according to the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). While there’s plenty to consider when you look at new heating and cooling systems – the latest options, the cost to buy them, and your short- and long-term needs – it’s also important to look at how much energy they use and cost to operate.

By choosing the most energy-efficient equipment that meets your needs, you may be able to spend less money to heat and cool your home. Using less energy is good for the environment, too; it can reduce air pollution and help conserve natural resources.

Facts for Consumers

Here's how to tell how efficient a system is:

Once you know which systems could work for you, here's how you find out about the energy efficiency of specific models:

- **The EnergyGuide label.** Anyone selling heating and cooling systems – central air conditioners, furnaces, boilers, and heat pumps – has to let you know about a product's energy use before you buy it. Manufacturers provide that information on a product's EnergyGuide label. But depending on how you shop, you may not see the actual product and label, so the information might be on a website, a fact sheet, a brochure, or a directory. If they don't point the information out, ask.

For more on the EnergyGuide label, required by the Appliance Labeling Rule, which is enforced by the FTC, read Energy Guidance: Appliance Shopping With the EnergyGuide Label at ftc.gov. EnergyGuide labels let you know how energy efficient a model is compared to others like it.

- **The Energy Star logo.** The logo means the product meets certain energy efficiency criteria set by the Environmental Protection Agency and DOE. Learn more and look up specific products at energystar.gov.

How Else Can I Save on Energy?

Being an energy-smart consumer means getting the most from the energy you use:

Do a home energy assessment.

A home energy assessment is a careful look at how efficient your heating and cooling systems are and where your home is wasting energy – say, through air leaks or under-insulated attics and ducts. Your utility company may offer free or low-cost energy assessments, or it may

recommend a local company or organization to do them. Check with your state or local government energy or weatherization office for recommendations, or visit energysavers.gov for more resources.

- **A professional assessment** with special equipment like blower doors and infrared cameras might cost several hundred dollars. Before you choose a company, be sure to get several references, and check the company record with your local consumer protection agency and the Better Business Bureau (BBB). Make sure the auditor uses a calibrated blower door and does thermographic inspections, or else contracts with another company to do them. Expect recommendations for specific fixes and improvements you can make.
- **A do-it-yourself assessment** is an option if your budget doesn't allow for a professional. For more on how to do it, visit DOE's Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy (EERE) at energysavers.gov/your_home, or use the online tool at hes.lbl.gov.

Seal air leaks and insulate:

- **Seal air leaks** around windows, doors, and places where pipes and wires come through walls. Check existing caulking and weatherstripping for gaps or cracks.
- **Check ducts for holes and gaps** where sections have separated and air may be leaking. You can seal some leaks yourself with mastic sealant or metal tape (don't use duct tape). Hiring a professional to repair leaky ducts can be a good investment.
- **Bring your insulation up to DOE-recommended levels** wherever your energy assessment shows it's needed.

If your home has very old or inefficient windows, it might be more cost effective to replace them. Learn more at energysavers.gov/your_home.

Look into special energy efficiency offers.

Ask your local utility or system salesperson about cash rebates, low-interest loans, tax breaks, or other incentives for buying energy-efficient products, and how you can qualify. You can learn about tax credits and incentives at energysavers.gov.

Don't overlook the small stuff.

The savings might be small, but they add up. Other energy-saving ideas include:

- **Lowering your thermostat** in winter and bumping it up in summer before you go to bed or head out for the day, or get a programmable thermostat to do it automatically.
- **Checking filters** for forced-air furnaces, heat pumps, or air conditioners as recommended to see if they need to be cleaned or replaced, and **checking that fireplace dampers** are closed when you don't have a fire going.
- **Considering a budget-billing program**, if your utility or oil company offers one. While you won't actually pay less, a budget-billing plan spreads your costs over the whole year, protecting your budget from seasonal spikes. If you're on a fixed income or have trouble paying your utility bills, contact your utility company. They, or your state or local government, may have energy assistance plans.

If you use heating oil, consider shopping around to make sure you're getting a good price. Research a company and its service before you sign a contract. If you live where you can choose your natural gas provider, shop for a good price on gas.

Don't get burned by "energy-saving" products and services.

Be skeptical of gadgets and products that promise drastic reductions in home cooling costs or extreme energy savings. Make sure any product claims can be verified by an independent source you trust. Resist high-pressure door-to-door sales calls for furnaces, windows, and other home improvement products. For more on finding a contractor who's licensed and reputable, read Home Sweet Home Improvement at ftc.gov. Remember that the Cooling-Off Rule gives you three business days to cancel a contract if you sign it in your home or at a location other than the contractor's permanent place of business.

Where to Learn More

To learn more about saving energy as you heat and cool your home, visit:

- Energysavers.gov/your_home and energystar.gov
- Your state and local energy offices
- Your local utility company