

Are you energy smart?

Small steps can save big bucks at home

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 WALL STREET JOURNAL

With higher heating and electricity costs on the horizon, and the economy teetering on a freefall this week, it seems prudent to muster a few energy-saving efforts around the house.

For the past nine months, I've investigated a range of big-ticket investments to help cut my home's energy costs—from solar panels and geothermal wells to "tankless" water heaters. But in the meantime I've managed to trim bills by taking a few smaller eco-steps.

The good news: The little steps work. My electricity consumption this year has dropped 687 kwh from the same period a year ago; in the past two months alone, I saved about \$86. Keeping that up, I'd be on target to save roughly \$500—or nearly 40 percent of last year's electricity bills—over the next 12 months.

Here are some steps I've taken:

Chest freezer swap

Why it helps: Chest freezers consume 10 percent to 25 percent less energy than comparable uprights because cold air doesn't spill out of the door when opened, according to the Department of Energy.

Cost: \$298 for a 10-cubic-foot Energy Star Whirlpool chest freezer at Lowe's.

Savings: My large 1998 upright 20-cubic-foot freezer cost an estimated \$77* a year to operate and sat mostly empty. The slimmer new one costs about \$30 to run annually. To calculate how much your old freezer or fridge costs and what a new model would save, go to recyclemyoldfridge.com.

Dialing back dryer use & hot-water washing

Why it helps: The average electric dryer is an energy hog, consuming about 970 kwh a year, according to the Rocky Mountain Institute. While newer models are more

efficient and shut off when clothes are dry, going au natural can save more. I use an indoor drying rack for about half my wash.

Cost: \$32 at amazon.com for a chrome Polder folding dry rack; \$96 for a retractable line unit at breezedryer.com.

Savings: Cutting out 50 percent of electric drying saves about \$52 a year.* Bonus cost cut: Switching from hot to warm water can cut laundry energy usage in half, according to DOE.

Unplugged

Why it helps: Even when fully charged or in off or standby mode, many plugged-in devices still draw, or "leak," power. That costs the average household about \$100 each year. The worst offenders: TVs and computer printers, according to Dan Kammen, professor in the energy-resources group at University of California, Berkeley. "Even when they're doing nothing, these draw more than a CFL light bulb in the on mode." His solution: Unplug when possible and use power-strip surge protectors to make it easier.

Cost: PowerSquid surge protector, \$49.95 at powersquid.com; Kill A Watt Electricity Power Meter, \$29.95 at cableorganizer.com.

Savings: Eliminating "leaking" could save 9 percent to 12 percent on monthly electricity bills, according to Kammen.

Cut incandescents

Why it helps: Energy Star compact fluorescent light bulbs use 75 percent less energy (though require special disposal because they contain mercury) than incandescent bulbs, while light-emitting diodes use up to 90 percent less electricity.

Cost: CFL prices range from \$2 to \$15 at most lighting retailers; \$385 for 20 linear feet of LEDs from Borealis Lighting (borealislighting.com).

Savings: Lighting costs \$50 to \$150 a year in energy bills for the average U.S. household, according to the Rocky Mountain Institute. The Department of Energy estimates newer technologies can cut lighting-energy usage by 50 percent to 75 percent.

A little caulk, a little savings



Why it helps: Many homes are poorly insulated and sealed against air leaks. While the biggest gains can be had by sealing ductwork and adding new insulation, drafty windows and door frames are an uncomfortable problem that's cheaper to improve.

Cost: \$3.72 at greendepot.com for a tube of Titebond Painters Plus Caulk.

Savings: The Energy Star program estimates homeowners can save up to 20 percent on heating and cooling costs by sealing and insulating.

*** SAVINGS BASED ON NATIONAL RESIDENTIAL ELECTRICITY PRICE AVERAGE OF 10.77 CENTS PER KWH FOR 12 MONTHS ENDING MAY, ACCORDING TO U.S. ENERGY INFORMATION ADMINISTRATION.**

