

Austin Climate Protection: House Efficiency Tips

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This month's climate protection tips offer simple and inexpensive ways to reduce home energy consumption.

Lower your water heater thermostat

If you always have plenty of hot water, you may be able to get by with lowering your water heater's thermostat setting. CAUTION - Just don't lower it below 120° F. Electric heaters benefit most from this approach to saving energy. Timers are also available, which allow you to make the water heater conform to your water usage schedule. Timers prevent the water heater from trying to maintain hot water during periods when it is never used.

Pipe wrapping

Do your water pipes pass through an unheated area? Do they run under your house or from an unheated utility room? If so, insulate your pipes—at least the hot water pipes. Uninsulated hot water pipes lose heat and cause your water heater to work harder. While the same is not true of cold water pipes, insulating them can prevent them from sweating and dripping in heated areas, or freezing in unheated areas. To wrap your pipes, easy-to-use, pre-formed foam pipe insulation sleeves are available. These sleeves have a slit down their length and just snap in place on the pipes.

Replace Furnace Filters

Most furnace filters are inexpensive, disposable, and easily replaced. Clogged filters reduce airflow through the heating/cooling system, forcing the unit to work harder. Severely clogged filters can cause the unit to overheat and can lead to premature compressor damage in air conditioning systems.

Check your furnace filter monthly. If you use the more expensive disposable filters designed to filter out allergens and extremely small particles, you may want to hold the filter up to make sure light still comes through easily. However, even these filters should be replaced at least every three months.

Ceiling Fans

Home ceiling fans can save energy in both summer and winter. In the summer, fan blades should revolve in a counterclockwise direction. Since moving air feels cooler, using ceiling fans in the summer allows you to raise the thermostat temperature, reducing the workload of your air conditioner. In winter months, set your ceiling fan at its slowest speed and reverse it in order to gently push warm air down from the ceiling without generating a breeze.

Cover windows and seal doors

Cooled air lost through windows and doors represents a significant portion of most cooling bills. Some sources estimate that loss through windows alone could account for up to 35 percent of cooling bills. If you are tired of watching your hard-earned money slip through the cracks, here are some things you can do:

- Check around windows and doors with a candle or a light piece of thread on a windy day to determine where drafts are. This will reveal problem areas in need of immediate attention.
- Remove and replace damaged caulk and weather-stripping. Self-stick foam and rolled rubber stripping are easy to install, and can contribute greatly to your home's efficiency.
- Decorate your windows with efficiency—closed shutters, window shades, blinds, curtains, and lined draperies. All contribute to energy savings by helping to insulate windows.
- For a long-range solution, consider installing efficient storm windows and doors.

More Energy Saving Tips

Develop habits for practical energy conservation. You can reduce your energy expenditures simply by developing energy saving habits such as these:

- Showers usually require less hot water than baths. Additional savings can be realized by installing water-saving shower heads. The primary benefit is lower heating bills brought about by using less energy to heat less water.
- Use heat-generating appliances such as washers, dryers, or ovens during the cooler hours of the morning or evening. This reduces the load on your air conditioner in the summer, and actually helps heat the house in the winter.
- Electric stovetops are energy drains. Use the appropriate burner for your pan size. Also, flat bottom pots make better contact and conduct heat from the elements more efficiently than pots with warped or rounded bottoms.
- Wash only full loads of clothes when possible and clean your dryer's lint filter after every load.
- In the summer, keep drapes and curtains closed on the sunny side of the house. In the winter, open those drapes and curtains on sunny days to take advantage of the sun's heating power. Close all drapes, blinds, or shades at night in winter to make use of their insulating properties.
- Use an exhaust fan to pull excess heat and humidity out of the bathroom and your kitchen in the summer. Be aware, however, that exhaust fans can rapidly pull the heat from your house in the winter.
- Perhaps the most often quoted hint for saving energy in the home is to set thermostats at 68° F in the winter and 78° F in the summer.