Begin right here

Many people have read or received information about the energy crisis. Everyone has experienced the results of this complex problem — a large increase in the cost of the energy we use. That comes out of your pockets.

Expensive energy-saving suggestions have been getting most of the publicity for the past several years. But there are good low-cost and even free ideas. The U.S. Department of Energy has selected some measures that offer the greatest return for the least effort and expense. And they won't leave you sweltering, freezing or groping in the dark.

By following all the suggestions, or whichever ones apply to you, you should be able to save 25 percent of your fuel oil, gas and electricity bills. At current energy prices, these suggestions will put up to $500 a year back into your pocket in a typical home.

The best low-cost actions often get lost in lists of less-lucrative tips. That's why these ideas have been selected and given special billing. About half of these ideas can be carried out for free.

And all of them can be accomplished on an investment of $100 or less, some of which can be paid back through the 15 percent Residential Energy Tax Credit.

Even if you are planning to insulate, add storm windows or make other major energy-saving purchases, you should do these 11 things first. They are cost-effective. They offer quick paybacks, and in some cases, they will increase the savings you get when you install insulation later.

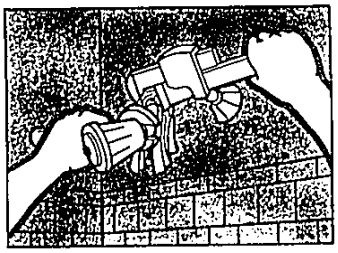
So go to it. You can't lose on these simple efforts, and you may be pleasantly surprised at the results.

Getting out of hot water

Actions 1-4 deal with hot water. Hot water leads the list of low-cost opportunities, both because it is a very expensive commodity and because its costs can be easily and inexpensively reduced by 50 percent if you apply actions 1-4.

To give you an idea of what savings you can expect, a family of four uses 65 gallons of hot water a day. If your water is heated electrically, it now costs in the range of $300 a year.

If it is heated with gas, the annual hot water bill is more likely $100 a year. A 50 per cent savings on hot water could mean $50-$150 back in your pocket each year.



1. How to keep your shower from cleaning out your bank account.

Let's say that your family has a standard shower head that releases five-six gallons per minute. If two members of the family take a five-minute shower every day, that's 50-60 gallons of water cascading down the drain.

Roughly 40 percent of that water is hot. At this rate, your family will use 7,000-8,500 gallons of hot water every year at this shower head alone.

That will cost you $75-$100 annually if your water heater is electric and $30-$40 if your water heater is gas.

You can get back a hefty chunk of that money — without taking colder or shorter showers — by installing a flow controller. The flow controller is inserted between the shower head and the shower arm.

It reduces the flow of water to three gallons per minute, while the shower continues to give off a good spray. You can enjoy a comfortable shower and still wind up saving one gallon of hot water per minute, or up to 4,000 gallons of hot water a year.

That's a savings of $40 a year for electric water heaters and $15 a year for gas water heaters. Either way, it's a decent return for less than $1 and a few minutes effort.

Most shower heads screw right onto the arm or pipe that extends out from the wall. They can be removed with a wrench. You might want to put a cloth around the area where the wrench is applied so that the shower head or shower arm is not damaged or scarred with the wrench.

The shower head should come off easily. If it doesn't, don't force it, because too much pressure might twist, pinch or break the shower arm.

Once the shower head is removed, the flow controller is inserted into the shower head, large end first. Push or screw it in as far as it will go.

The shower head is then put back on the shower arm until it fits snugly and tightly. If the joint leaks, try a little pipe joining compound on the threads.

On some ball-type installations, the shower head is not removable from the shower arm, and flow controllers cannot be easily installed.

To put the water controller device on kitchen faucets, you start by unscrewing the aerator at the end of the spigot. The controller is then pushed into the spigot pipe, small end first.

If you do not have an aerator on the end of your spigot, it may take a plumber to do this job. Since calling a plumber just for this purpose will be too expensive, you can wait until you need the plumber for some other reason and then ask him to put in the controller.

2. How low can you go?

If the thermostat on your water heater is set between 140°-160° F., you can reduce the setting to 110°-120° and save at least *$20 a year for electric water heaters and* $10 a year for gas. If this change in thermostat setting produces spotty dishes in the automatic dishwasher, or if there isn't enough hot water for all the household needs, you can always turn the dials back up a little. The lower the setting you can accept, the more money you will save.

Anybody with a screwdriver and five minutes to spare can reset the water heater thermostat. At the front of most water heaters, there are one or two plates held on by screws.

Turn off the circuit breaker if you have an electric water heater and then remove the plates. Push back the insulation and you will see the thermostat.

It will either have numerical settings or simply the designations "high," "medium" or "low." Reset the thermostat to 120° or "low." After replacing the insulation and reinstalling the metal plates, turn the circuit breaker to its "on" position.

There is a myth that lowering the temperature of hot water only causes people to use more of it, and therefore, that nothing is saved. The fact is, dialing down the thermostat saves money in two important ways.

It reduces the amount of costly hot water

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