

10 WAYS TO REDUCE YOUR SUMMER UTILITY BILLS FROM US News & World Report

– In the basement: Cleaning air conditioning filters every month and getting your system checked by a professional once a year will ensure that it's functioning as efficiently and inexpensively as possible. A lot of people ignore the AC system until something goes wrong, then they end up buying an entirely new unit instead of making minor fixes.

If you need a new air conditioner, an energy efficient one might be eligible for a tax credit. When you're shopping around, look for a unit with a seasonal energy efficiency ratio of 16 to 21, the highest level of efficiency.

– Throughout the house: Make sure your house is leak-free, or else nice, cold, expensive air is going out the cracks. You can perform a casual energy audit yourself. We recommend feeling around baseboards, windows, doors, light switches, and electrical sockets for air leaks. Air can escape or enter anywhere that two different building materials meet. Old, wooden windows are especially prone to this kind of leakage.

If you find problem areas, seal it with foam or caulking. Insulation that meets certain efficiency criteria is also eligible for the federal tax credits. Properly sealing your house can save up to 20 percent on your utility bill.

Using a programmable thermostat so that the temperature automatically rises when no one is home during the day can yield annual savings of about 30 percent.

– In the living room: There's nothing wrong with hosting movie nights this summer, but make sure you shut your entertainment center down when the evening's over. Simply turning off a television set doesn't put a stop to so-called "vampire power"--the power that devices consume even when they're not in use. That's why you should either unplug your electronics or use a Smart Strip, which cuts power when it's not needed.

– In the kitchen: Cooking in the kitchen in the summer will force your air conditioner to go into overdrive. Plus, eating hot food will only make you want to turn the thermostat down. Instead of using your oven, consider an outdoor grill or toaster oven for small amounts of food.

– In the bathroom: You can make your toilet more efficient by dropping a soda bottle filled with sand or water into the back. It will use less water each time it flushes. Small steps such as turning the water off while brushing your teeth or shaving can save a substantial amount of water (and money on your water bill) each year. Also think about installing a water conserving showerhead.

– In the bedroom: Stay cool while you sleep with an overhead fan instead of pumping air conditioning throughout the entire house. Shutting the doors and vents of unused rooms can also lighten the load of your air conditioning unit.

– Outside: A way to reduce cooling costs in the longer run is to plant trees or shrubs so that your house is more shaded, especially on the sunnier side. (For a quicker fix, draw the blinds or shades when you're not home.)