

Save Money and Energy on Air Conditioning



Keep those summer electricity bills from going through the roof.

"Shut the door! You're letting the cool air out!" If you're a parent, you may have said this to your kids. And you probably remember *your* parents saying it back in the day. Let's face it: Air conditioning bills can make you hot under the collar. Try these tips to help lessen the shock of opening your bill. (And yes, close that door!)

Insulate. "The best way to save on A/C is to make sure your house and the A/C ductwork are well insulated," says Celia Kuperszmid Lehrman, Deputy Content Editor, Home & Appliances, for Consumer Reports. "That helps keep cool air inside instead of leaking outside or into the attic and the walls that the ductwork runs through." This is generally a job for a professional. But you'll make the money back relatively quickly because these measures will save on winter heating bills, too.

Clean up. Have your central A/C serviced professionally, or vacuum the fins on your window A/C units with the brush attachment, Lehrman suggests. Keep yard debris away from the outside compressor of your central A/C unit. Keep nearby bushes trimmed. Regularly clean or replace (this depends on the unit) the filter during the cooling season.

Don't crank it down. It's a common misconception, but setting the temperature lower than normal will not cool down the room faster. But it will make the unit work harder so it will use more energy.

Think shade. Close blinds and draperies on the sunny side of the house. Consider adding awnings. Planting trees on the sunny side of your house helps, too.

Use a ceiling fan. The breeze on your skin makes you feel up to 7 degrees cooler, so you might not even need to turn on the A/C — or you can set it to a higher temp, which will save money. Note: The breeze that makes you feel cooler is not really cooling the room so you don't need to run the fan if you're not in the room.

Use a programmable thermostat. "This is a must for central A/C systems" says Lehrman. "And if you have a combined heating and cooling system, you should have a thermostat that can control both. That can save you a couple hundred dollars a year." But you must program it, she adds. "Newer thermostats are very easy to program. The beauty here is that once you program it, you don't have to do anything; the thermostat does it for you." There's no reason to run the A/C when no one is home. Just program the thermostat to turn the system on shortly before you come home so that the house is cool when you arrive.

When buying a new A/C unit, look for the ENERGY STAR label. "ENERGY STAR-rated systems are more efficient than standard systems, and the savings accumulate over the years of use," says Lehrman. "But remember, you have to buy matching parts, the outside compressor and the inside air handler, to get the rated efficiency," she adds. "Plus your ductwork needs to be insulated." Here's the biggest mistake people make when buying A/C, whether central or window units: oversizing the unit. "Bigger is not necessarily better. An A/C that's too big will cool down the room before it's had a chance to remove the moisture and humidity in the air, so you'll have a cold, clammy house or room," says Lehrman.