

Use these tips to lower heating costs

Written by Marcia Humphrey
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When we finally moved all of our belongings from Georgia to Minnesota we had so much stuff, that it completely filled an 18-wheeler. Although the movers were hardworking, friendly fellows, the inevitable still happened; they broke a couple of things, namely two of the legs on my sofa. I didn't let it bother me, I simply called for the furniture repair company to come over and fix it. (Our contents were insured, so it was no problem.) A very chatty gentleman was sent out and in between his masterful repair skills, he asked me where I was from and what brought me to the Twin Cities.

I shared with him that I had been in the south for the past seven years, and had to become re-acclimated to the brutally cold Minnesota winters. To that he replied, "Well, you know what they say; the cold weather keeps the riff raff out!" Well I definitely must be riff raff because these frigid temperatures have me dreaming of making a run for it! If you are sitting in your home in your heavy sweater (and hat) and feeling the pinch of rising heating bills, then it's time that we review ways to keep our homes warmer, while reducing our heating costs.

Locate gaps in your home

If air is blowing in near windows and doors, grab the caulk gun, an easy-to-install door sweep seal and plug it up (or make repairs with appropriate material.) Proper insulation, especially in the attic, will make your home warmer, too. Lots of small cracks add up to big money flying out of the window. Potential savings: \$200-\$400 annually

Close the vents and turn down the heat

Don't heat the rooms you rarely use. Instead close the vents and save money. I know you don't want to freeze, but even if you turn the thermostat down one degree, your bill will be about 5% lower! Potential Savings: About \$50-\$60 annually.

Install a programmable thermostat

Starting at around \$100, this is a pretty easy do-it-yourself-project that could save you a lot of money. (My husband changed ours over in less than one hour.) During the eight to 10 hours that you are at work, the thermostat could be set back eight degrees, as well as the time in which you are sleeping. Potential Savings: \$150 annually

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Change your furnace filter

A dirty filter costs extra money by causing the furnace to work overtime. Consider changing them on a monthly basis and save up to 5%. Potential Savings: up to \$100 annually.

Give your furnace a check-up

Although this is ideal at the beginning of the heating system, if you are concerned that your furnace is not working at its optimal level, consider investing around \$150-200 to have a professional check-up. In addition, you can do an assessment yourself. Log on to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's new ENERGY STAR Home Advisor Web site (www.energystar.gov/homeadvisor) for tips the agency claims could help you reduce your energy bills by up to 25 percent, and provide a customized list of recommendations.

File for an energy tax credit

If you are already planning to replace an old furnace, boiler, or water heater with energy-efficient units, you can save money on your taxes. Look for products with the ENERGY STAR logo, since they are said to use 10 to 50 percent less energy and water than basic models.

Since we have at least two to three more months of heating bills, it would be worthwhile (not to mention money-saving) to go through your home and see if you are throwing money away by neglecting some of these simple tips. While there is no harm in adding another layer of clothing during chilly evenings, you may just find a simple solution which allows you to take off that extra hat and be more comfortable at home. After all, a cozy home is a place you should always be able to ENJOY!

Marcia Humphrey is an interior decorator and home stager who specializes in achieving high style at a low cost. A native of Michigan, she and her husband Lonnie have three children.