

# FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Office of Consumer and Business Education

## Cooling Your Home: Don't Sweat It

As the mercury rises, so can the costs of keeping your home cool. And while news reports about high energy prices may have you in a sweat, the Federal Trade Commission has some tips to help you save money while keeping your home cool this summer.

1. Do an energy audit to help detect waste and gauge the efficiency of your current cooling system. Your utility company may offer free or low-cost energy audits, or you can conduct your own. The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and U.S. Environmental Agency (EPA) offer tips and checklists at [www.homeenergysaver.lbl.gov](http://www.homeenergysaver.lbl.gov). The home “walk-through” can help you spot areas that need attention or problems that, if fixed, could save you money. For example:

- Check your attic, attic stairway, attached garage walls and basement to make sure your home is insulated to DOE-recommended levels for your geographic area. When inspecting and buying home insulation products, look for the R-value. The higher the R-value, the greater the insulating power.
- Have your central air conditioning (AC) system serviced each spring. Your utility company may provide this service.
- Hire a professional to seal and insulate leaky ducts, and to ensure that the airflow distribution system serving your equipment is operating at peak efficiency.
- Clean or replace AC and furnace filters once a month or as needed, and seal holes around plumbing and heating pipes.
- Install a programmable thermostat. You can save money by keeping your house warmer than normal when you're out, and keeping the setting at 78°F when you're home.
- Install drapes, shades, blinds or another window covering. Keeping them closed during the day blocks the sun and the heat from the sun's rays.
- Consider replacing single-pane windows with double-pane windows with high-performance glass. Look for low-emissivity (low-e) or spectrally selective glass. In warmer climates, select windows with spectrally selective coatings to reduce heat gain. In colder climates, select windows that are gas filled with low-e coatings on the glass to reduce heat loss.
- Open your foundation vents each spring if your home has a crawl space under it.
- Install ceiling fans. The air circulation promotes cooling in the summer and heating efficiency in the winter.
- Prune back shrubs and remove debris, like grass and leaves, that may block airflow to your air conditioner.
- Plant a tree. Landscaping is a natural way to shade your home. Well-placed trees and shrubs not only deliver shade, but also add value to your property.
- Shade room air conditioners from direct sun to reduce their workload. Clean the filters once a month and replace them as necessary to promote energy efficiency. Lower the setting when you go out to reduce operating costs.
- Apply a reflective coating to your roof. Dull and dark-colored home exteriors absorb 70 to 90 percent of the sun's energy. Light-colored surfaces reflect most of the heat away from your home.

2. If you're buying a new air conditioning system, make sure it is sized correctly (bigger is not always better) and installed properly for cost-effective use. When selecting a new unit, be sure to consider high-efficiency models. While energy efficient appliances may cost more up front, they may save you money in the

long run. To compare models, check the black and yellow EnergyGuide labels, which the FTC requires on most major appliances, including central and room air conditioners. The labels provide useful information about products' energy efficiency and estimated annual operating costs. Air conditioners with higher energy efficiency ratios are more energy efficient.

3. Ask your utility company about a budget billing plan to protect against sudden or unexpected price increases. Your provider takes the amount of energy you use during one year and divides your monthly payments into equal parts. At the end of the season, you pay any outstanding balance or your provider credits any overpayment to your next monthly bill.

4. If you're on a fixed income and have trouble paying your utility bills, contact your utility company. They, or your state or local government, may have energy assistance plans to help you pay your energy bills.

## Protecting Your Cold Cash

When energy prices rise, so does advertising for a host of energy-saving products and services — including some that are overpriced or just plain bogus. Be wary of devices, gadgets and energy-saving products that promise drastic reductions in home cooling costs or extreme energy savings. For example:

- Read the energy-saving claims carefully and, if possible, get independent information about a product's performance.
- Be wary of unsolicited offers from door-to-door salespeople and high pressure personal or telephone sales pitches from contractors offering air conditioning systems, windows, roofing, and other home improvement projects.
- Make sure that a contractor is licensed and reputable: Ask your friends and neighbors for referrals; ask the contractor for customer references; and check out potential contractors with the Better Business Bureau, state and local consumer protection officials, and your state licensing agency. The FTC's Cooling-Off Rule gives you three business days to cancel a contract if you sign it in your home or at a location other than the contractor's permanent place of business.

## For More Information

Call the FTC toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357) or visit **www.ftc.gov**, to get the free publications: **Heating and Cooling Your Home, How to Buy an Energy-Efficient Home Appliance**, and **Home Insulation Basics: Higher R-Values = Higher Insulating Values**.

DOE's Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy Network is a clearinghouse of energy-efficiency information. Find it online at **www.eren.doe.gov** ; call toll-free, 1-800-DOE-EREC (1-800-363-3732) (TDD: 1-800-273-2957); or write to U.S. Department of Energy B EREC, PO Box 3048, Merrifield, VA 22116.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop and avoid them. To file a complaint, or to get free information on any of 150 consumer topics, call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357), or use the complaint form at **www.ftc.gov**. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.

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