

FTC Consumer Alert

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

Weathering the High Cost of Heating Your Home

Whether you heat your home with oil, natural gas, or electricity, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has some tips to help you save money and stay warm this winter.

- Conduct an energy audit to help detect waste and gauge the efficiency of your current heating 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) offers instructions at www.homeenergysaver.lbl.gov. The home “walk-through” may help you spot needed maintenance 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 area. When inspecting and buying home insulation products, look for the R-value. The higher the R-value, the greater the insulating power.
 - Wrap your hot water heater in an insulating jacket.
 - Schedule an annual tune-up for your heat pump, furnace or boiler. 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 heating equipment is operating at peak efficiency.
 - Clean or replace filters on forced-air furnaces, seal flues in fireplaces you don’t use, install drapes or some other covering on windows, and seal holes around plumbing and heating pipes.
 - Install a programmable thermostat that will automatically lower nighttime temperatures.
 - Check caulking and weatherstripping, and repair where necessary.
 - Close your foundation vents in the winter if there’s a crawl space under your home.
 - Close the doors to rooms that you don’t use.
 - Prune shrubs that may block airflow to your heat pump.
 - Install ceiling fans. The air circulation promotes heating efficiency in the winter.
 - When buying a new furnace, boiler, heat pump, water heater, or other home appliance, consider a high-efficiency model. Although some energy efficient appliances may cost more to buy than other models, their lower operating costs may save you money in the long run. Use the black and yellow EnergyGuide labels to compare the energy use or efficiency of models. You can find these FTC-required EnergyGuide labels on most major appliances. The labels provide useful information about products’ energy use or efficiency and estimated annual operating costs. In addition, the EnergyStar logo will help you identify high-efficiency appliances.
 - Shop around for the best prices on oil — and gas, if you live in an area that lets you choose your natural gas provider.
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- Ask your utility or oil 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 it into equal monthly payments. At the end of the season, you pay any outstanding balance or your provider credits any overpayment to your next monthly bill.
- 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 heating bills.

Don't Get Burned

When energy prices rise, so does advertising for a host of energy-saving products and services — including some that are just plain bogus. The Commission recently settled charges against marketers who claimed their “liquid siding” product had a significant R-value and would yield dramatic reductions in consumers’ utility costs. Although good maintenance such as caulking and painting can reduce air leaks in older homes, consumers should be wary of coating or paint sellers that promise their product will perform like insulation or will significantly reduce utility bills.

Sellers offering other devices, gadgets, and energy-saving products also promise drastic reductions in home heating costs or extreme energy savings. Read energy-saving claims carefully and, if possible, get independent information about product performance. Avoid unsolicited door-to-door sales calls and high pressure sales pitches from contractors offering furnaces, windows, roofing, and other home improvement projects. To make sure that a contractor is licensed and reputable: Ask 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** and **How to Buy an Energy-Efficient Home Appliance**.

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 consumer issues, visit www.ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. 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.