

Seven Ways to Cut Your Heating Bill, Stay Warm and Save Energy This Winter

By Don Vandervort

Across the United States, we clearly have vast climate differences. But we all share a desire to stay warm and comfortable in the winter without spending a fortune on heat. With that in mind, let's look at a few ways you can achieve a more comfortable indoor environment while reducing energy costs.

- 1. Check your thermostat.** If it isn't a programmable electronic model, replace it with one that is. A programmable thermostat can automatically adjust room temperature settings to energy-saving levels when you're sleeping or away from the house, eliminating wasteful energy usage.

Never set your thermostat higher than it needs to be for comfort. Over a 24-hour period, you can save about three percent of your energy costs for every degree you lower the thermostat's set temperature in the winter.

- 2. Seal up your house.** Install weather stripping around windows and doors. Caulk any cracks or openings in the siding. And consider installing or repairing storm windows and storm doors. These improvements will help prevent your home's expensively-heated air from escaping.
- 3. Take advantage of the sun's warmth.** Allow radiant energy from sunlight to augment your home's heating system simply by opening drapes and blinds on sunny days.
- 4. Consider ceiling fans.** If you can do so relatively inexpensively, consider installing ceiling fans—particularly in rooms with high ceilings. Warm air rises and can be trapped near the ceiling. If you run a ceiling fan in reverse direction during the winter, it will circulate warm air back down to living areas.
- 5. Insulate your home adequately.** Increase insulation, particularly in the attic. Not only is the attic usually the easiest place to insulate, but it's where you will see the greatest benefit in energy savings.
- 6. Consider replacing your furnace.** If it's on its last legs, you may save money and energy with a new furnace. Forced-air heating systems are by far the most popular type of central heating, but most forced-air systems are out-of-date. Some utilize only 50 percent of the fuel they burn. Newer models take advantage of up to 90 percent of their fuel.
- 7. Control the humidity levels in your home.** For comfort in winter, your home's relative humidity levels should range from 30 to 50 percent. If they drop below this, the air becomes very dry and you'll need higher temperatures to feel warm. Conversely, if the air becomes too humid, windows drip with condensation. In most cases, the problem in winter is lack of humidity because heaters dry out the air. To boost the humidity, you can buy a humidifier, which puts water vapor back into the air. Room or console humidifiers will handle individual rooms and small areas, but for the entire house you'll need a whole-house system that is installed as part of the heating system.

If after taking these measures you still haven't beat the winter chill, do what I do: Put on some slippers and a sweater and cozy up to a warm fire.