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# How to lower your energy bills

by [Nick Vadala](#), Posted: October 13, 2020



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As cooler weather sets in, most folks will be looking to keep their homes warmer. So, it's official — heating season has arrived.

That may translate to higher gas and energy bills as we're home more and need to stave off the cold. Especially in winter, when [Peco's hike in natural gas costs could bring a \\$7-per-month increase](#) to 540,000 customers. But while that's not a huge increase, saving money is on everyone's mind.

One way to do that is to [weatherize your home](#), says Steve Luxton, executive director and CEO of [the Energy Coordinating Agency](#) (ECA), a Philadelphia-based nonprofit that deals with energy conservation. And that could even help you out later on, too.

“Weatherization is a generic term used for making your home perform better in the heating season,” he says. “But whatever you do to your home in the wintertime is actually going to benefit you during the summer as well.”

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If it sounds expensive, it can be, but **there are programs that make it cheap or free** if you are low-income (even if you rent).

**So how can you prepare your home for heating in the colder weather and reduce bills?** Here is what you need to know:

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## Find the problems

The first step, Luxton says, is an energy audit to **identify where your home can be more energy-efficient**. These can be done in person or virtually.

“The energy auditor will put together a prescriptive list of cost-effective measures that they can do,” he says.

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An in-person audit takes up to three hours and involves the use of a tool called a blower door, which pulls air out of your home to determine how “leaky” it is — meaning how much conditioned air it lets out. The amount of air your home leaks is measured with a manometer, and that determines how often your heater turns on, which costs you money.

Generally, an in-home audit by an independent contractor, or “home-performance company,” as they are known, will cost a few hundred dollars. But **utility companies like Peco offer them for between \$50 and \$100** (though they are currently on hold due to the coronavirus pandemic), or **\$25 for a virtual appointment**. Low-income customers, meanwhile, can schedule [a free energy assessment](#) if they qualify financially.

## Block any air gaps

The name of the game is “air sealing,” Luxton says. That means **filling any gaps or cracks in your home where air can escape** to reduce how often your heater needs to warm up the place.

Luxton says there are two main ingredients to weatherize a home: caulk and expandable foam. They can be found at any big-box store for a few dollars, and go a long way toward preventing heated air from escaping your space.

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Use them from your basement to your attic to seal up any spots where cold air could enter or warm air could exit — around windows and doors, holes around pipes and wires, and any other breaches you see. Large gaps might require installing foam board, or Mortite, which is a puttylike caulking solution.

## Add insulation

The biggie, Luxton says, is insulation, particularly in your attic, where most of the heated air escapes. Luxton’s favorite type is cellulose because it’s more environmentally friendly — although foam is the most effective (and also the most expensive). But the material isn’t as important as the fact that some form of insulation is there, and that the space has been air-sealed.

“A 5-year-old will tell you that heat rises, so everybody is familiar with the concept,” he says. **“The most cost-effective area to add insulation, far and away, is the attic.”**

## Turn the heat down to 68

**The ideal interior temperature during winter is 68 degrees**, [according to the Department of Energy](#), so keep your heat around there. When you’re sleeping or not at home, Luxton says, you can roll that temp back a few degrees without feeling the difference. If you stick to that regimen, Luxton estimates, you could save as much as 15% on your heating bills throughout the season. [A programmable thermostat](#) can help, and can be had for \$100 or less.

If 68 degrees seems too cold, bundle up.

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“It’s winter. It’s 25, 30 degrees outside. Running around in shorts and a T-shirt, you’re paying for that if you want to keep your house comfortable,” he says. “Wear slightly heavier clothing in the winter time so that 68 degrees doesn’t feel quite as cool as it is.”

## Don’t replace your windows

One thing that should be in the bottom of the list of improvements, Luxton says, is replacing your windows. Of course, windows are a place where plenty of heat can escape, but the problem is that “there isn’t a cure.”

“In terms of the actual reason you are buying it — thermal performance — there is next to nothing in improvement,” he says. That may be different if you have single-glaze, so-called “Florida windows,” but most homes in this area, Luxton adds, don’t fall into that category.

**Instead, consider a window kit.** Priced at around \$10, those kits involve installing a layer of clear plastic over your windows to help keep warm air in. When installed correctly, they can do “as much if not more” than a new window, Luxton says.

## How much is this going to cost me?

Weatherizing your home, Luxton says “can be the work of an energetic, determined homeowner,” but he suggests hiring a professional.

The entire process can cost thousands of dollars, depending on what your home needs. But you don’t need to go crazy. Consider how much you need to spend compared to how long it will take to save that amount on your energy bills — a concept known as “payback” — and go from there.

**You may even be able to weatherize your home for free** — [even if you rent. Pennsylvania’s Weatherization Assistance Program](#) provides free weatherizing, including air-sealing and insulation, to some low-income applicants, as long as they are within 200% of the federal poverty line, and meet other requirements. (That means that, for example, a family of four can have a gross household income of up to \$52,400 to qualify.)

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ECA administers the state program in Philadelphia, and [you can apply for assistance online](#). Plus, Luxton says, the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission requires that energy providers, like Peco and PGW, provide low-income ratepayers with weatherization assistance. So check with your provider to see if you qualify.

“We’ve weatherized, since the company was founded in 1984, 45,000 homes,” Luxton says. “All weatherization provided by us is free to the end user. All we really need is their cooperation.”



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