

Reducing Energy Costs in Older Homes

Top Five Actions You Can Take Today

1 INSULATION & AIR-SEALING: If you have less than 12 inches of insulation in your attic, or if it's damaged by rodents or water, fix the problem. If your home is very leaky and/or poorly insulated, consider hiring a professional. For more information, see the article in this issue about a Vermonter who lowered her older home's heating fuel use by nearly 50% with the help of a Home Performance with ENERGY STAR® contractor.

To find leaks yourself, use an airflow indicator such as an incense stick to test for drafts. If the smoke is drawn toward, or forced away from, such areas as an attic hatch, chimney chase, knee wall hatch/access, you've got a draft to seal. Larger holes can be sealed with expanding foam, which comes in a spray can. Seal around window frames and door frames with caulk and weather stripping. As forced-air heating systems age, leaks can develop in the ducts. When these leaks are in unheated areas of your home (attics, basements, garages, etc.), they can contribute tremendously to your energy bill. Examine ductwork that is easily accessible. Feel for air leaks at joints and seal the ductwork. It's best to use long-lasting mastic sealant or foil-faced tapes designed for sealing rather than common duct tape.

2 OLDER EQUIPMENT: If your refrigerator was manufactured in 1992 or earlier, it could be using twice the energy of a new ENERGY STAR labeled fridge. When it's time to replace other older appliances, air conditioners, heating equipment, bath fans, water heaters or lighting, look for the ENERGY STAR label to lower your energy costs.

3 ELECTRIC WATER HEATERS: Many older homes have electric water heaters. Electricity is the most expensive water-heating option. Switch to a fossil fuel system and save.

4 WINDOWS: The cost-effective time to install energy-efficient windows is when you need to replace a window that is no longer functional. If your windows work but feel drafty, it's more cost-effective to improve

their efficiency by blocking drafts rather than to replace them. Replace any cracked or damaged glazing. Use caulk to seal gaps around window frames. Loose windows may benefit from side-mounted sash locks to hold the sash close to the frame. Covering windows with heavy drapes will help reduce drafts and heat loss. Inexpensive plastic window-covering sheets are effective and can be found at hardware stores. Storm windows can be a very cost-effective way to reduce energy costs and to increase your comfort if you currently have single-pane windows.

5 FIREPLACES: See that dampers shut fully and be sure to close them after all ashes have gone cold. If you have fireplace doors, use them. Here's why: Chimneys not only do a good job of drawing smoke out of the house but they also pull warm air out of the house. As warm air is lost up the chimney, equal amounts of cold, outdoor air are drawn into the house through gaps around windows and doors, plumbing vents, wire pathways and more. (That's why wingback chairs are traditional around fireplaces; they help protect people from the draft coming toward the fireplace.) The result is a costly cycle, because your central heating system then works harder to replace the lost heat and to compensate for the incoming cold air. This phenomenon is at its worst on the coldest days of the year.

To Reduce Costs in Homes of Any Age

A free, new guide to energy-saving home improvements is a mouse click away. Efficiency Vermont's "The Energy-Smart Home" takes a comprehensive look at all the systems and products that have an impact on your home's energy bills, durability, comfort, air quality and safety. This 38-page booklet covers heating, ventilation, cooling, appliances, lighting, windows, insulation and more. It even provides tips on hiring contractors. To download the guide at no charge, visit www.encyvermont.com. Enter "Home Improvement" in the search box and then click on the first link that appears.