



Play it cool with your AC

As summer approaches and temperatures start to rise, you might begin to see your electric bills rising, too. After all, if your home has a window or central air conditioner, it's one of your household's biggest electricity-users. But properly operating and maintaining your air conditioner can help reduce the amount of energy it uses.

Opening windows and using a ceiling fan for ventilation at night, but keeping your house closed tightly during hot days, costs less than operating your air conditioner. Use your air conditioner only when the ventilation isn't sufficient. When the air conditioner is on, don't operate a whole-house fan or window fans, and double check to make sure all windows and doors are closed.

Don't cool unoccupied rooms, but don't close too many registers with a central system either, or the increased pressure may harm the compressor. If your air conditioner has an outside air option, use it sparingly. It's far more economical to recirculate and cool then indoor air then to cool the hot outdoor air to a comfortable temperature.

You'll probably be comfortable with the thermostat set at about 78 F, but ceiling fans can increase your comfort range. You'll save 3 to 5 percent on air conditioning costs for each degree that you raise the thermostat. You can also increase comfort at warmer temperatures by reducing the humidity in your home. Use a bathroom exhaust fan when you shower, don't dry firewood in your basement and don't vent your clothes dryer inside.

Air conditioners and heat pumps need regular maintenance to perform at peak efficiency. Keep vegetation overgrowth clear from the condensing unit. Also, clean the air filters on room air conditioners monthly. Allowing them to become dirty enough to impede air flow could damage the unit. The condenser should be cleaned by a professional at least once a year.

Central air conditioning units should be inspected, cleaned and tuned up by a professional once yearly. This will reduce electricity consumption while extending the life of the unit. Your unit's refrigerant may need recharging when the unit is serviced. The charge must be correct, because a 10 percent undercharged system can operate at 20 percent reduced efficiency. On the other hand, an overcharged system can damage the unit and shorten its life. Also, because some refrigerants damage the ozone layer, the refrigerant must not leak into the environment, but can and should be recycled.

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