

The Sensible Environmentalist

Cut Energy Costs By Up To 30%

DEAR DR. MOORE:
If I make my home more energy efficient, how much can I realistically expect to save on my utility bills?

Saving energy has always been about lowering costs as much as it has protecting the environment. It started in the 1970s, when energy shortages and rising prices gave people an incentive to reduce their energy use—and it's why homes built today are, on average, 100% more energy efficient than homes built 30 years ago.



Dr. Moore

Now it's happening again. The US EPA estimates that the average household spends \$1,500 a year on energy, but says that number could increase by as much to 50% in the coming months. At the same time, experience has shown that basic improvements can save homeowners up to 30% on their energy bills.

About half of a home's energy is used for heating and cooling, so the first step should be to make sure that your home is properly sealed and insulated. If you choose to tackle the job yourself, bear in mind that doors and windows—while they should be properly sealed—don't tend to be the worst offenders. Look for spaces around pipes, chimneys and wiring that penetrates the insulation. Weather-strip or insulate your attic hatch or door, and seal any holes (such as those for ducts or plumbing) that lead from the attic into the rest of the house.

You may also want to hire a professional energy auditor, who is trained to pinpoint leaks. With a few improvements, you should be able to recoup the investment quickly.

The next step is to evaluate your lighting and appliances, which can represent up to 20% of your energy bills. According to the EPA, 50% or more of the energy used to light American homes is wasted due to obsolete equipment and inefficient use. Replace standard incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescents, which consume less energy and last longer—and turn lights off when they aren't in use. (It's a myth that switching a light off and then back on uses more energy than leaving it on.)

Energy Star appliances are a bigger investment, but they follow strict standards for efficiency and save money in the long run. In 2004, the Energy Star program saved about \$10 billion worth of energy—which is enough to power 24 million homes.

Aside from being relatively easy (the ideas above are just a few of many possibilities), energy efficiency is good for the environment, saves money, and will hopefully reduce the need to source natural gas and oil in parts of the world that are politically unstable. If your home isn't as efficient as it could be, do something about it today. It makes sense.

Dr. Patrick Moore has been a leader of the environmental movement for more than 30 years. A co-founder of Greenpeace, he holds a PhD in ecology and a BSc in forest biology. Questions can be sent to Patrick@SensibleEnvironmental.com