



Advice on energy usage during COVID-19

During Covid-19 we are required to stay at home to help keep our communities safe. More time at home will mean more energy is used at home with hours on the computer or watching TV, more time with the lights on, more time spent cooking and an increase in the need for heating – particularly over the winter months ahead.

The impact these activities will have on energy bills may not be top of mind right now, particularly as people focus on immediate concerns such as rent, food and income support. But as households receive their energy bills over the coming months, many will see an increase in their bills at the same time as they have experienced a significant loss of income.

This guide outline practical steps households can take to minimise the likely increase in their bills over the coming months, access assistance, and stay connected.

While there are simple actions households can take, remember that energy plays a vital role in helping people maintain both their physical health and their social and emotional well-being. The advice in this guide is about making the most of your energy usage, not about using less energy than you need to stay warm and healthy. If you are rationing your energy to an extent that is impacting your health and well-being, we encourage you to reach out for assistance (see Section 6 below).

1. Using energy more efficiently

These no or low-cost actions can help you safely reduce your energy bills by changing the way energy is used in your household:

- Wash your clothes in cold water (it is just as safe and healthy).
- Ensure your washing machine and/or dishwasher is full before you run it.
- Air-dry clothes and avoid using the dryer where you can.
- Turn off lights, televisions and other appliances when you leave the room. (With more people at home, it will be easier than before to leave these on. Over time, the cost of doing so will add up).
- Where possible turn appliances off at the wall and reduce the number of devices left 'on standby'.
- If you can, check the thermostat on your hot water system. It should be set at 60°C for storage hot water systems and no more than 50°C on instantaneous systems.
- Try to stick to 4 minute showers where you can – it takes a lot of energy to heat water.

2. Staying warm in winter

With more time at home, the cost of heating is likely to have the biggest impact on energy bills. To keep heating costs down, you can:

- Dress for the weather: Warm yourself before you heat the room.
- Check your house or flat for holes or gaps, particularly in ceilings or floors. Anything you can use to block any gaps will help keep cold air out and warm air in.
- Seal door and window gaps where you can. Weather-stripping is cheap and easy to install around windows and doors. Even a door snake (or rolled up towel) can be effective.
- Let sun in during the day, and close curtains/ blinds or cover windows at night. Some people who do not have thick curtains put bubble wrap on their windows to keep the warmth in (you might like to take this off during the day so you can see outside properly).

- Try to close off rooms in which you spend the most time and heat these to a comfortable temperature. If you don't have many internal doors, heavy material can be used as curtains to help keep warmth where you need it.
- Heaters:
 - If you can, set the temperature between 18°C and 20°C in winter.
 - If used properly, reverse cycle air conditioners are usually the best for heating large spaces (although it depends on the heater, its age and the room). Cheap portable heaters can be very expensive to run but are okay for small spaces for short periods of time (such as a bathroom). Try to avoid electric bar heaters as much as possible.
- If you have a ceiling fan, check if it has a 'winter' switch. If it does, it will push the hot air back down towards the ground.

3. Upgrading to more efficient equipment

If you are able to replace appliances, an energy efficient model will help save you money in the longer term, particularly for big energy users such as fridges, washing machines, and heaters. To help find an efficient model, energyrating.gov.au is a useful tool. Remember the cheapest appliances will often cost much more to run.

Assistance with upgrading appliances may also be available through the following programs:

- The No-Interest Loans Scheme (NILS) provides access to safe, fair and affordable credit for people on low-incomes so that they can buy the essentials they need. You can contact the Vinnies NILS program on 1800 484 664, or via email at nils@vinnies.org.au
- If you have an old fridge or TV you may be eligible for significant discounts via the [NSW Appliance Replacement offer](https://energysaver.nsw.gov.au/households/rebates-and-discounts/appliance-replacement-offer). (Visit <https://energysaver.nsw.gov.au/households/rebates-and-discounts/appliance-replacement-offer>).

Water efficient shower-heads can also save energy and water. Showers can use more than 20 litres of water per minute, and this takes energy to heat. An efficient shower-head can halve the amount of water used per minute.

- All residential property owners connected by Sydney Water are eligible for the [WaterFix program](http://www.sydneywater.com.au/SW/your-home/helping-you-save-water/waterfix-residential/index.htm) which includes low-cost installation of efficient showerheads. This program is currently on hold due to COVID-19, but new bookings may be available soon. (Visit <http://www.sydneywater.com.au/SW/your-home/helping-you-save-water/waterfix-residential/index.htm>).
- If you rent and your landlord has not installed an efficient showerhead, you are not required to pay water usage charges.

4. Using less energy at peak time

If you are on a Time Of Use (TOU) tariff, changing the time you use energy can help reduce your bills. You can find out what kind of tariff you are on by looking on your bill: If it mentions peak and off-peak times, you are on a TOU tariff and using less energy in the peak periods can save you money. Check your bill to see what times your peak period covers. Tips include:

- Running your dishwasher or washing machine outside the peak, for example, after you go to sleep.
- Avoiding using your heater or air-conditioner during the peak period where you can (you could pre-heat your home in the off peak time and keep the heat in using the tips above).
- Charging any phones or other devices while you sleep.

If you have a flat tariff, the times you use your electricity will make no difference to your bill.

If you have solar panels on your roof, the best way to save money will be to use as much of your own energy as you can while the sun is shining, and to try and reduce usage at other times.

5. Choosing the best energy deal

Many people pay more for their energy than they need to because they are not on the deal that best suits their situation. You can check if you are on the best deal by using the [NSW Energy Switch service](https://energyswitch.service.nsw.gov.au/). (Visit <https://energyswitch.service.nsw.gov.au/>).

If you want to stick with your current retailer, call them directly to ask for the best deal they can offer you. (If you are on a hardship or payment plan or have existing debt it is often best to stay with your current retailer).

6. Accessing assistance

The NSW Government provides a range of energy rebates to support households with the cost of energy, but many households are not accessing all the assistance to which they are entitled.

The [Service NSW Cost of Living service](https://www.service.nsw.gov.au/campaign/cost-living) can help connect you with any relevant energy rebates, as well as savings across a range of goods and services to help reduce cost of living pressures. (Visit <https://www.service.nsw.gov.au/campaign/cost-living>).

If you are experiencing or at risk of financial stress you should also call your retailer and explain that you are in 'hardship' as a result of COVID-19. Retailers are required to assist people having difficulty paying their bills.¹ This assistance may include payment plans, hardship assistance, ensuring you are on the best offer, and arranging to pay for usage only. Talking to your retailer as early as possible is important as this can help ensure you do not accumulate debt, and are not disconnected or referred to debt collection agencies. If you have not already done so, your retailer can also help ensure you are accessing all the rebates for which you may be eligible.

If you are still struggling to pay your bills, contact an Energy Accounts Payment Assistance (EAPA) provider to request assistance. For EAPA assistance through Vinnies, call 13 18 12.

¹ Under the Retail Law, all authorised retailers are required to develop, maintain and implement customer hardship policies for residential customers. The Australian Energy Regulator has further issued a Statement of Expectations, outlining how retailers should enhance business as usual responses during the pandemic.