

Cool Down Energy Costs

Summer's here, and the time is right to stop blowing so much money on air conditioning.

Sure, you need to stay cool. But many households have inefficient air-conditioning systems that waste cash every time they're cranked up. And with natural-gas prices skyrocketing, there's even more reason to keep an eye on energy use.

**TIP OF
THE WEEK**

By taking steps to save energy, for example, the average U.S. family could save up to \$90 per month during the summer on cooling costs, according to the Department of Energy. At www.energystar.gov, online calculators will tell you what size unit you need and how much you might save on your bills.

For starters, ditch your vintage 1970s air conditioner and replace it with a more efficient one. Look for an Energy Efficiency Ratio (EER) of at least 10 for a room air conditioner, or 14 for a central-air system. And make sure it has an Energy Star label, meaning it meets federal efficiency standards. In many states, you can get a bonus of \$20 or \$30 when you turn in your old energy-guzzler for an Energy Star model.

Expect to pay around \$300 for an average-size room air conditioner, or several thousand for a central air-conditioning system.

If you're running a newer model, simply cleaning the filters once a month will boost its efficiency. You can even save money just by closing the curtains—sunny windows can make your AC work three times harder. Save another 10% on your energy bills by using a programmable thermostat to ensure you don't waste electricity during the night or when you are out. And you can always go low-tech: Using a ceiling fan to reduce your reliance on air conditioning can save you another \$10 a month or so.

By Andrew Blackman