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Family Finances

Watch Out for 'Vampire Energy' Costs

It goes by several names—standby power, leaking electricity, vampire energy—and if you live in the typical American household, it costs you about \$35 a year, or between 4% and 7% of your home electricity use (about the same as a new, efficient refrigerator uses in a year).

It doesn't sound like much, at first glance. But according to President Bush in a speech he made on the topic last summer, "If we multiplied the vampire devices' energy consumption across the country, we're talking about 52 billion kilowatt-hours over a year, or the equivalent of 26 average-size power plants."

What can you do to cut back? Not much, since the leaking energy comes from equipment you already own, and it isn't terribly efficient to go around unplugging every appliance after you use it. But there are a few things you can do.

■ **Unplug** television sets, VCRs and other appliances that you don't use frequently.

■ **Use** "power strips" to control groups of appliances that have standby power, such as computers and audio equipment. Switching off the strips will curb energy leaks.

■ **Recharge** your cellphone in your car instead of at home. And unplug recharging devices when you're not using them.

■ **Buy** consumer electronics with the government's Energy Star label, a symbol of energy efficiency.

Standby power is defined by California's Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, a lab operated for the Energy Department, as "power consumed by an appliance while switched off or not performing its primary purpose."

We're talking about any appliance with a remote control (think televisions and garage-door openers), a digital clock or display (microwave, VCR) and anything with a recharger (cordless phone, portable vacuum cleaner).

A typical home will have 20 such



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devices drawing standby power. The culprits can include things you don't normally think of as wasting electricity—doorbells, thermostats, answering machines. According to Berkeley Lab, standby power is "probably the fastest-growing use of electricity in U.S. homes."

Home offices contribute to the problem. "Computer equipment adds up," says Alan Meier, a staff scientist at the Berkeley lab. "Many scanners don't have 'off' switches, for instance. They're always on, and how often do people use their scanners?"

To figure out how much you spend on leaking electricity each year, count up the number of devices in your home that you suspect use standby power—remember, anything with a remote control (even ceiling fans and decorative gas fireplaces), anything with a digital display (washing machines, coffee makers) and anything that's plugged into the wall in order to charge a portable device (portable CD player, cellphone). Then multiply that number by two, and that's about how many dollars a year your household spends on vampire energy.

In coming years, many devices that now leak will be made more energy-efficient, which will translate to lower energy bills for the typical home. As Mr. Meier puts it, "the future will be better."

By Tim Townsend