

Your Meter Never Takes a Break

Even when you head off for vacation, your meter keeps working. That is because electricity is used regardless of whether you are home.

By Pam Blair

It's easy to forget about conserving electricity when you and your family pack up the car to head off on vacation or a lengthy trip.

But if you don't give it a thought before you leave, you could face an unpleasant—even irritating—surprise when you return home.

While it seems to make no sense, your energy bill can be the same—or even higher—when your home is unoccupied. That's because some equipment, motors and electrical devices use power, whether or not anyone is home.

To avoid becoming a victim of wasted energy—and money—assess how your home uses electricity.

A major consumer of electricity is the heating and cooling system.

Before you pull out of the driveway, you turn the thermostat to its lowest possible setting. You are proud of yourself, thinking you have effectively turned off your heating system. In reality, you have only turned it to the lowest setting—generally 55 degrees.

That means the heating system will come on each

time the temperature inside the house drops below 55 degrees. In the fall, winter and even spring, that could be every day.

The same principle applies to your air conditioning system.

To really disable your heating and cooling system, shut them off at the breaker panel. Before you do that, though, make sure the house won't get so cold your plumbing is at risk.

Ironically, if you fail to shut off the breaker, your heating costs could actually rise when you are not home. That's because clothes drying, cooking, bathing and human activity give off heat that contributes to a home's temperature.

Without a human presence, the heating system must work harder.

The second-biggest user of electricity is your water heater. Because it is out of sight, it is easy to forget.

If you will be gone for more than two days, turn the heater off at the breaker. Left on, the water heater will work to keep all 50 or more gallons of water in the tank heated to



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120 to 140 degrees, 24 hours a day.

Refrigerators and freezers draw electricity to keep your food cold and frozen in your absence. If you will be gone for a prolonged time, shut them off at the breaker and prop open the doors to prevent mildew from growing inside.

Anything that uses clocks, memory, remote control, microprocessors and instant-on features—such as televisions and VCRs—consumes

small amounts of electricity even when turned “off.” Unplug those items before you leave.

Lights left on 24 hours a day also can use a significant amount of energy. A timer will save you money.

After you have let your meter know you are gone by turning down and shutting off everything that makes sense, you can enjoy your vacation with the knowledge you aren't wasting energy—or money. ■

Plan Ahead Before Vacationing

Just because you are not home doesn't mean you are not using electricity. To cut your costs while away:

- ▶ Unplug all unnecessary appliances—especially “instant-on” electronics. They use electricity constantly, whether or not they are on.
- ▶ Turn off the heat, air conditioning and water heater at the breaker panel.
- ▶ Rather than leaving lights on to discourage burglars, put a few lights on a timer system.