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High energy bills?

Maybe your home needs an audit

BY JUSTIN CAVE • PHOTOS BY ALF N. ELDER

Don't let the word "audit" scare you! An energy audit is really just an efficiency "checkup" for your home. Whether you have lived in your home for 30 years or just purchased a newly constructed home, you may need to make some improvements to reduce energy loss and improve efficiency.

According to the U.S. Department of Energy, "A home energy audit, or home performance exam, is the first step toward assessing how much energy your home consumes, and helps you to provide solutions to make it more efficient."

The purpose of a home performance exam is to diagnose the problems. Locating air leaks is a huge step toward efficiency. Heating and cooling is typically the largest part of your utility bill. According to Richard Shields of the Hoots Group, an Atlanta business specializing in creating healthy, energy-efficient homes (www.thehootsgroup.com), "You can have up to a 30-percent increase in energy consumption from leaky ductwork, bad insulation and old windows."

Excessive dust in your home could mean that your ductwork is not properly sealed, or that it is time to change your air filter. Moisture on the inside of windows can be a sign that they aren't sealed properly.

A high energy bill could also indicate that your HVAC (heating, ventilating and air-conditioning) unit is not working properly. It's recommended that units more than 15 years old be replaced. Newer systems are more efficient. Look for a unit with a high SEER, or Seasonal Energy Efficiency Rating, (www.energystar.gov). Damp basements, mold, mildew and musty odors are all signs of humidity, which can result in structural damage, health problems and an uncomfortable house.

You can perform a do-it-yourself audit by conducting a simple, but thorough, walk-through of your home. Some steps you can take are inexpensive and easy to do. However, a professional can help you determine the exact places where your home is losing energy.



The blower door test and duct blast test are two of the most common and effective diagnostic measures. The blower door test shows the air exchange between the interior and exterior of your home. By creating negative pressure inside the home, it makes air leaks obvious. Typical sources of air leaks include old windows and doors, attics, recessed lighting, dryer vents, crawl spaces, even electrical outlets.

The duct blast test shows how well sealed your ducts are. Most professionals will recommend that these be cleaned and properly sealed. If you live in an older home, you may be surprised at how much dust and debris your

ductwork is hiding!

Some of these issues can be fixed by a simple bead of caulk or some strategically placed weather stripping. However, more costly improvements such as new double-paned windows and doors or a new heating unit may be required. This is why it is important to create a plan for after the audit. Ask yourself a few questions. Where are you losing the most energy? What is your budget for repairs? And, most important, can you do the job yourself, or should you hire a professional? Then determine what improvements are going to make the most impact or save you the most money, not to mention that if you



do make substantial energy improvements, you may be entitled to a tax credit.

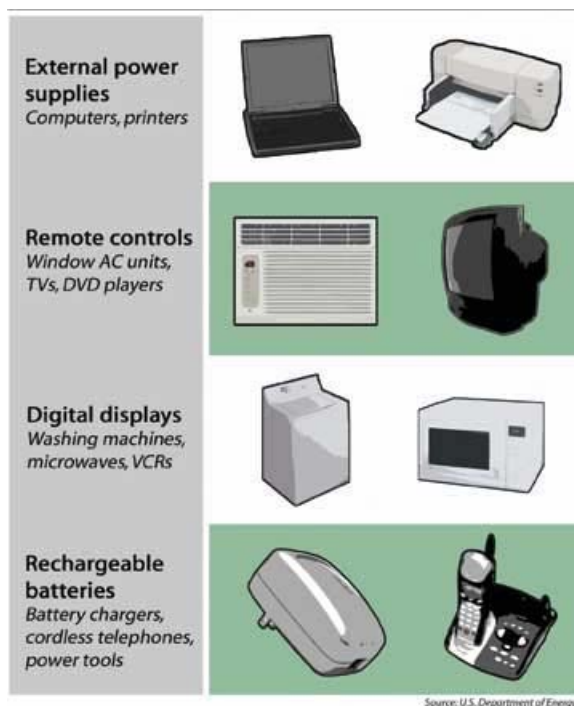
There are several resources where you can learn how to make improvements. First, check with your electric cooperative. Another option is Touchstone Energy's Home Energy Audit (touchstoneenergy.cooperative.com/public/programs/energyefficiency/homeenergyaudit.htm), which is a fast way to determine the savings you can make!

Remember, your home is your castle. You can reduce consumption, save the environment and make financial gains—but most importantly, feel comfortable in your abode!

Justin Cave is host of HGTV's "Ground Breakers" and principal of Sierra Consulting.

Spotting vampire electronics

Many devices constantly draw power while plugged in, which can quickly add up on monthly electric bills. Keep an eye out for the following clues as to what should be unplugged when not in use for prolonged periods of time:



Product of the month

An organized garage

The garage is often the most neglected part of a home. Get organized this spring with the Gladiator GearTrack Pack. Installable in just 15 minutes, the unit contains everything you need to begin your garage makeover.

Why struggle with those tangled rakes, shovels or extension cords when you can simply lift them from their own hook? The GearTrack includes two pieces of durable channeling that provides 8 linear feet of storage space on which you can hang just about anything. The kit includes two 4-foot sections of channel, a scoop hook, two J hooks, two L hooks, a twin hook, a utility hook and a tool hook.

This unit is customizable and compatible with all Gladiator GarageWorks accessories. For more information about the GearTrack, visit www.gladiatorgw.com, or call (866) 342-4089. The GearTrack Pack retails for \$49.

