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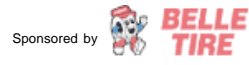
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- [Real Estate](#)
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Fight summer heat while staying thrifty

Dana Dratch / Bankrate.com

Summer means fun in the sun, kids out of school and big power bills.

The air conditioning that makes summer livable in many parts of the country comes at a steep price. According to EPA statistics, "heating and cooling costs make up 49 percent of the average energy bill," says Maria Vargas, spokeswoman for the EPA's Energy Star program.

But there are a few ways that you can keep your cool without a sky-high power bill.

"The real opportunity for people to save the most is through improved efficiency in the home," Vargas says. "The average family spends \$1,900 a year on energy bills."

Homeowners can save 30 percent of that just by being more efficient with their energy use, she says.

So enjoy the lazy summer days without getting crazy over the bills. Here's how:

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Four tips to start saving right now

Turn the thermostat up a couple of degrees. Keep it comfortable, but if your family can live with 80 instead of 78, you can save about \$30 during the half of the year you use air, says an EPA spokeswoman.

Close off unused rooms. Shut doors and air ducts to seldom-used rooms so that you're not air conditioning them.

Shut the blinds. Closing drapes and blinds keeps out sunlight and heat.

Go online: You can do your own personal home energy audit at <http://hes.lbl.gov>.

Source: Bankrate.com

1. Use a programmable thermostat. Consumers buy them and even install them. The one thing they often neglect to do? Program and use them, Vargas says.

When you do, you stand to save about \$150 a year, she says. How it works: You program your home to cooler temperatures when you're home and warmer settings when you're not there. Since you're only cooling a room when you're there, you save money, Vargas says. Typically, the gadgets run about \$50 to \$100, and some local power companies are giving them to customers free.

2. Enjoy more summer fare. Skip cooking and you not only save time, you also don't heat up the house. Grill out, cook twice the amount you normally would and save the extra for the next night's heat-free meal, says Debra Ponzek, co-author of "The Summer House Cookbook."

Turn leftover grilled chicken or beef into a salad, quesadilla or panini. Extra grilled vegetables can go into salads and pasta, which require minimal cooking time, she says.

If you're short on time, you can pick up precooked salmon or shrimp at the store. "Toss it with

something cool and light" for a summer salad, Ponzek says.

Prepare your evening meal in the morning, before the heat of the day.

One cool solution: cold soups, Ponzek says. On the stove they take about 45 minutes, then chill in the refrigerator until you're ready to serve them.

3. Insulate your attic door. Everyone remembers to insulate the attic, but no one remembers the attic door. The attic door can pull heat, says Carole Koble, manager of North Carolina State University's Solar House.

The solution is easy and fairly inexpensive, she says. You can pick up specially designed, ready-to-hang insulators made of hard or flexible plastic foam for about \$125.

4. Use ceiling fans. They cool you down by moving air, but they don't actually change the temperature. While the amount of savings is tough to quantify, use them with a slightly higher temperature on the thermostat to make the house feel just as cool, Vargas says. But don't run them when the room is empty.

5. Create an outside oasis. One way to lessen the need for air conditioning? Get outside. First, create a cool, green haven. Use trellises with fast-climbing plants -- North Carolina State University's Solar House uses kiwi vines -- along with native trees and plants to give your area a lush feel. If you don't want to wait for trees to grow, consider hiring a pro to install larger trees. The trade-off: money for growing time.

For instant shade, you can supplement with patio or beach umbrellas or a cabana. A water feature can add an extra sensation of relaxation and heat relief.

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