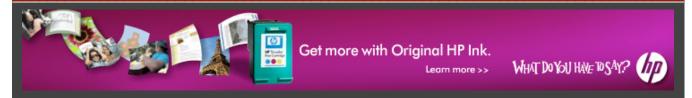# Unplug for Dollars: Stop 'Vampire Power' Waste

You can save a few hundred bucks a year by unplugging electronics that aren't in use. Get the lowdown on costs, plus some products to help you cut back on kilowatt consumption.

JR Raphael
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Here's an offer too good to refuse: Score an extra couple hundred bucks, help save the environment, and barely lift a finger in the process. Interested?

The secret lies in an often overlooked but easily corrected problem. Put simply, you're paying electric bills for stuff you aren't using. As long as they're plugged in, your computers, peripherals, and home electronics are eating up energy when you think they're off--and in no small amount, either.
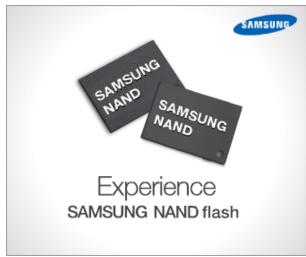
Meet Your In-House Dracula

In industry parlance, this phenomenon is often called "vampire energy loss," and it's easy to see why. Like the blood-drinking creatures of the night, your devices are sucking down power while you sleep--albeit without the bite marks.

"Anything that's plugged in pretty much these days is drawing some current," says Mark Bernstein, managing director of the University of Southern California's Energy Institute.

Experts estimate that standby energy drain accounts for anywhere from 5 to 10 percent of an average home's annual power usage. Convert that percentage into dollars, and you've got around $4 billion in wasted spending across America every year, the Department of Energy estimates. For most families, that means a minimum of $130 a year--more than some people spend on a typical month's electric bill.

The Vampire Hunt

I'll be the first to admit I'm an energy hog when it comes to electronics. So I enlisted the best energy gurus--and, yes, the best energy gadgets--to help uncover my home's energy vampires. The first challenge: finding the culprits.

"There's no way for consumers to even know which devices draw a lot of power while off," says Alan Meier, a senior scientist with the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory's Energy Analysis Department (LBNL developed and supports the useful Home Energy Saver Web site). "They look entirely the same."

That's where [P3 International's Kill A Watt EZ](#) can help. Available online or in home repair stores for $40 to $50, the device shows how much energy an item is using and how much it's costing you. We started with remote controls. I have ten, no less, and that was the first sign of trouble. "Any time you see a remote, that means there's some standby power consumption [by the device or devices it controls]," Meier says.

More: "[Save Money by Watching the Watts](#)"

I lucked out in avoiding the worst offender: A plasma TV, the Department of Energy says, costs a whopping $165 a year for its standby power consumption alone. However, I did identify several other remote-controlled power wasters, including my cable box ($10.33 a year), my CRT TV ($5.16 a year), and my VCR ($3.10 a year).

And they were only the first culprits. Here's a list of other energy drainers we discovered in my home, and the annual cost of their standby energy consumption (based on applying the national average electricity cost of 11.8 cents per kilowatt-hour to the electricity consumption of each device, as measured by the Kill a Watt EZ):

- Desktop computer: $6.20

- Laptop (fully charged): $2.06

- LCD computer monitor: $1.03

- Wireless router: $4.13

- DSL modem: $5.16

- External USB hard drive: $2.06

- Computer speaker system: $5.16

- Inkjet printer: $4.28

- DVD player: $3.60

- Powered subwoofer: $15.50

- Microwave oven: $2.48

Even things like cell-phone chargers tack on an extra couple bucks when left plugged in, with nothing attached. Factor in other always-on appliances such as DVRs ($27.90 a year) and stereo receivers ($41.34 a year), and the total rises quickly. (Again, these calculations are based on my specific devices and the national average rate of 11.8 cents per kilowatt-hour; your mileage may vary.)

The wasted cash is bad enough, but the toll on Mother Nature is worse. Vampire energy accounts for 1 percent of the world's carbon dioxide emissions, Meier says. In the U.S. alone, that's equal to the combined annual production of dozens of power plants.
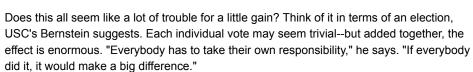
Guilt-Free Fixes

So how can you cut your costs and curb your carbon footprint? The obvious answer is unplugging items when they're not in use, but that's not always feasible: a DVR that isn't plugged in won't record your favorite show in your absence. And nobody wants the hassle of plugging and unplugging a dozen devices several times a day.

Fortunately, several devices address these issues. "Increasingly, we see power strips becoming smarter, more flexible, and capable of doing some of the tedious work for you," Meier says.

Models such as Bits Limited's Smart Strip power strips ($30 to $50, depending on features and size) can monitor electricity use and automatically cut power to devices in vampire mode. WattStopper/Legrand's Isolé Plug Load Control ($90) incorporates a motion detector and turns electronics off when a room is unoccupied for several minutes. The Belkin Conserve Surge Protector ($40 to $50) lets you cut off power to devices with a wireless controller.

All these models offer at least two "always on" outlets, giving you the ability to leave items such as DVRs or routers--which would lose functionality when unplugged--continously connected. You can also check planned electronics purchases for the Energy Star approval sticker, which indicates that they draw significantly less power than nonstickered competitors do when they're not in use--as much as 60 percent less, according to the Alliance to Save Energy.

Does this all seem like a lot of trouble for a little gain? Think of it in terms of an election, USC's Bernstein suggests. Each individual vote may seem trivial--but added together, the effect is enormous. "Everybody has to take their own responsibility," he says. "If everybody did it, it would make a big difference."

And hey, that extra couple hundred bucks in your back pocket can never be a bad thing.