

Winter Warmth and Safety: Home Energy Tips for Older Adults

Everyone appreciates a warm, comfortable home during the cold winter months. Yet with escalating energy costs many older Americans will find it a challenge to keep up with home heating bills this winter. Higher heating bills can be overwhelming. But with a little planning and preparation they don't have to be. The **Eldercare Locator** and the **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)** offer some economical ways to stay warm and safe at home. While it is best to take action before winter arrives, family gatherings during the holidays provide a great opportunity to discuss energy efficiency and winter safety.

Find out about financial energy assistance programs

- Many states, counties and cities provide programs that assist older adults with winter heating costs. Your local **Area Agency on Aging** is a good source of information about available community programs and eligibility requirements. To identify the Area Agency on Aging serving your community, contact the **Eldercare Locator at 800.677.1116** or www.eldercare.gov.
- Ask about the **Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)** – the federally funded program that helps eligible low-income homeowners and renters meet their home heating needs. The name of this program and eligibility requirements may vary across states. Be mindful that there is an application deadline for assistance, except for emergency situations.

Depending on where you live, LIHEAP may offer one or more of the following types of help:

- Heating funds (i.e., fuel subsidies) to increase the affordability of home energy;
- Low-cost residential weatherization and other home repairs to safely increase the efficiency of a household's use of home energy, thus lowering energy bills and making homes more comfortable; and
- Energy crisis intervention to address weather-related and fuel supply shortages and other household energy-related emergencies, such as utility shutoffs.

For details about LIHEAP visit <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ocs/liheap/index.html>

- Get information about the **Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP)**. Most state and local governments receive federal funds to help low-income families permanently reduce their energy bills by making their homes more energy efficient. WAP assistance is free and preference is given to people over age 60 and

households with children or people with disabilities. You must apply to determine eligibility.

WAP services are provided by local nonprofit agencies that employ energy professionals. They will thoroughly analyze your energy systems for safety and determine the most cost-effective energy upgrades for your home. This means that in addition to making minor repairs such as adding insulation, they will also check for hazards such as carbon monoxide, indoor air quality problems from mold and outdated electrical equipment and wiring.

To identify the WAP in your area, contact: 877.337.3463 or <http://apps1.eere.energy.gov/weatherization/>

Be aware of help provided by utility companies

- Check with your gas, water and electricity suppliers to see if they offer a monthly budget plan to help spread out energy costs throughout the year. Often they have special heating assistance funds, as well as “no cut off” guidelines to avoid termination of service for older adults, people with disabilities and ill customers who may have difficulty paying their bills.

Utility companies are also a great source for energy conservation information. They might be able to refer you to an expert to inspect your home for ways to make it more energy efficient, or provide a list of contractors to tune up your furnace so that it operates at peak efficiency.

Look for ways to cut down on winter energy use

- The ENERGY STAR Program, run by the EPA and the Department of Energy, offers steps to follow to make your home more energy efficient (888-782-7937 or www.energystar.gov). ENERGY STAR is a label that identifies and promotes energy-efficient products, including major appliances, office equipment, lighting, home electronics and more. These products can save about one third on energy bills without sacrificing features, style or comfort.
- Simple, inexpensive energy-saving things you can do yourself:
 - Have a friend or relative seal air leaks. Weather strip and insulate the attic hatch or door to prevent warm air from leaking out of the house. Use storm windows or stretch window film to keep out drafts.
 - Use an ENERGY STAR qualified programmable thermostat that can automatically adjust the temperature of your home when you are away.

- Prepare your furnace, boiler or heat pump for winter by having them professionally tuned-up in the Fall. Remember to change furnace filters at least every three months to keep warm air flowing.
- Although a log fire in your fireplace is attractive, it does not heat your home because heated air drafts up the chimney. When not using your fireplace, close the damper.

Ensure your health and safety

- In addition to addressing the need to stay warm during winter, consider safety as well. For example:
 - Avoid the risk of home fires. Do not use your stove or oven to heat your home. Keep batteries and battery-powered flashlights available. When needed, use flashlights instead of candles. Check to make sure that electrical cords on space heaters are not damaged and do not pose a tripping hazard.
 - Make sure that smoke and carbon monoxide detectors are installed and working properly. It is recommended that you replace the batteries at least once a year. As a reminder, pick a holiday or your birthday and replace the batteries each year on that day.
 - Insulate water pipes to avoid freezing and bursting. When freezing temperatures are expected leave water taps slightly open so they drip continuously. Drain and turn off outside water spouts.
 - Have a fire extinguisher ready to use. Fire extinguishers should be inspected at least once a year to assure that will operate effectively and safely when needed. Consult your telephone directory or local fire department for fire extinguisher service.

Have a back-up plan

- Before you need them, consider alternative arrangements should extreme weather conditions require emergency action.
 - Identify temporary living arrangements in case you are unable to stay in your own home and create a plan for getting there.
 - Keep in touch with family and friends. Ask someone to check on you daily – especially if you live alone.
 - Plan for your medical needs. Have extra medications on hand or identify a pharmacy that can deliver them to you.

- If you or a loved one in your home has medical equipment, be sure you know how it will need to be maintained or moved in an emergency.
- Share emergency contact information with everyone who would need it.

RESOURCES LISTED IN THIS PUBLICATION

Eldercare Locator, 800.677.1116, www.eldercare.gov

ENERGY STAR Program, 888.782.7937, www.energystar.gov

Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), 866.674.6327
www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/liheap

U. S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
Aging Initiatives, 202.564.2188, www.epa.gov/aging

Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP)
<http://apps1.eere.energy.gov/weatherization/>