



The Daily Gleaner

January 31, 2009

Are high energy bills getting you down?

Just last week a friend of mine was talking about how much she was spending on her electricity bill. She couldn't understand how her bill could be as high as it had been in the last place she lived. She now lives in a smaller apartment and has taken several measures to cut down on heat loss. She weather-stripped the entryway; put weather shield plastic on the windows; started turning the thermostat down during the day while at work; and wear a sweater in the evening rather than turning up the heat.

All this got me thinking. So I decided to ask her the amounts of her last two power bills. I was astonished to find out that they were both much higher than my own bills - I live in a house and she lives in an apartment. I began to suspect that heating was not the culprit here and decided to take an informal inventory of the components of her electricity consumption. Of course my ultimate goal is always to do better for the environment, but the great trade off, especially when it comes to making your home more energy efficient, is the cost savings.

First, she was off to a good start – weather stripping. Of course the best time to weather strip and caulk leaks around windows and doors is before winter, but don't be discouraged, do it now if you haven't already! If you own your own home be sure to insulate everywhere you feel cold air coming in. There are even pre-cut foam insulators for wall outlets. And if you don't own your place of residence, talk to your landlord about the things you are unable to do yourself. He/she may be interested to take some action to insulate here and there, particularly if heat is included in your rent! And even in an apartment or rental house you can take some low-cost steps yourself like my friend did: seal your windows with weather shield plastic in winter; turn the heat down during the times you are away; and opt for a blanket or warm sweater rather than turning the heat up past 19 degrees.

Additionally, here are a few more ideas I gave to my friend. Take note of your water usage for showers, baths and laundry. Are you or your family members taking long and/or frequent showers or baths? Heating your water takes a great deal of energy. If you love baths, maybe make them a "treat" rather than a habit, and switch to showering instead of taking a bath everyday. If you take long showers, try to shorten them. And finally, if you shower or bath everyday try to do so less frequently. Now I'm not suggesting we go back to the Elizabethan Era when they bathed once a month, but do we really need to bathe daily or even more frequently? For instance, on the days you plan to work up a sweat by going to the gym or for a run or cross-country ski, choose to hold off on the morning shower and wait until after your workout or in the evening.

If you don't have them already, be sure to install a low-flow showerhead and some low-flow faucet aerators. Another culprit of hot water usage is your washer. Most detergents now are produced to work as well in cold water as they are in hot. So there isn't a reason to use hot or even warm water when doing your laundry anymore. And did you know that the dryer is one of the most inefficient appliances in your

home? All of these points to the first order of business - wear clothes longer before washing them! In the winter clothes just don't get as dirty – no gardening, no playing in the sandbox, no sweaty walks. So try maximizing this benefit and wear your sweatshirts, sweaters and pants longer. It is particularly important to change your kids' habits - often they just automatically throw their clothes in the hamper each evening. And when you do wash your clothes try to hang what you can to dry.

There are a lot of little things we can do to lower our power bills and our carbon footprint in the winter months. We tend to take our 'conveniences' for granted, but it is not hard to change these old habits. It just takes some thought and maybe a few reminder sticky notes here and there throughout your house! "Wash clothes in cold". "Check hamper for kids clothes". "Gym today, no morning shower". And on it goes.

Valerie Hillier is a Frederictonian who continually tries to 'tread lighter on this earth' and she urges you to do the same. If you have any topics you would like to see the Green Matters Team write about in this column please e-mail them at greenmatters@fredericton.ca