

# Holiday lights, feasts, and parties drive up power bills

## DEAR MR. ENERGY,

Last holiday season our electric bill went way up. We had several get-togethers and obviously the lights on our house and our tree had some impact, but the increase seemed out of proportion to what actually went on. How can we use less energy this holiday season? And are LED lights really worth it?

—Celebrating in Chapel Hill

## DEAR CELEBRATING,

Mr. Energy completely understands where you're coming from with this question: the winter holidays, no matter what religion, cultural traditions, or customs, share certain things in common. Social gatherings and feasts are on the top of Mr. Energy's holiday list, and certainly decorating one's home, whether inside or out, is another. Being festive himself, Mr. Energy would never suggest you discard any of these happy holiday traditions, but he does have a few suggestions how to lessen the impact of all these activities on your energy bills.

You're right in assuming that the get-togethers and holiday lights make your bills go up. Feasting requires cooking, and cooking uses energy. Holiday lights need to be plugged in. As far as saving money on cooking goes, none of the solutions Mr. Energy has considered (like cooking in your toaster oven instead of your actual oven) seems practical or even worth it as far as saving real money goes, so he has no solutions there, besides suggesting you share meals with families and friends so as to spread the love and the energy bills.

As far as lights go, however, Mr. Energy does have a couple of suggestions. First, think about all the places in

## ASK Mr. Energy



and around your house you've typically used lights for decoration. Do you really need lights in all those places? This is a personal decision, of course, and Mr. Energy is passing no judgment if you answer yes, you really do need lights on your fence, your house, your garage, and the seventeen Bradford Pear trees that line your driveway. But consider this: if you need everything lit up, do you really need it lit up from the day after Thanksgiving through the first week in January, 24 hours a day? Instead of six weeks of holiday beauty, two or three might suffice, and perhaps 2-3 hours every evening is enough to share your holiday joy. And yes, LED lights are really worth it. They cost more than incandescent lights, but they are so much more energy efficient that they will pay for themselves in two to three holiday seasons, more if you stretch your holiday season to two full months.

Finally, think about this: your bill may not be high because of all the visitors to your house or your pretty lights; your bill may be high simply because of you. During the winter holidays it's very common for people to take several, if not more, days of vacation. Days of vacation typically mean days at home, and days at home means more energy use all around. Worse, in late December children also

are on vacation from school, and with their video game playing and TV watching and constant going in and going out and going in and going out (especially if there's snow!) they can really pack a wallop in terms of energy use. You didn't say if you have any children, but Mr. Energy does and he knows only too well the enormous energy suck that children can create. Mr. Energy's own electric bill went up almost 50 percent last December, and he knows exactly who should get the blame. Sadly, Mr. Energy's children are too young to get paying jobs so he shall have to shoulder the burden for a couple more years.

## DEAR MR. ENERGY,

What are some things I can do to my windows in lieu of replacing them?

—Breezy in Burlington

## DEAR BREEZY,

So glad you asked that question! If you've read any of Mr. Energy's earlier columns, you'll know that I do not consider window replacement as a top priority for most homeowners who are trying to save energy. Please don't misunderstand: replacing windows will save you money on your utility bills, but window replacement is so expensive that even with the federal tax credits and utility rebates it will usually take well over 15 years to get a return on your investment. There are better, more cost-effective ways to spend your money.

But meanwhile your windows are leaky and single (or even double, but old and cruddy double) pane and you know they are a big source of energy loss. Mr. Energy's going to assume you've already thought about the

obvious: caulking and weather-stripping any gaps, and repairing any broken latches or panes of glass. But besides covering them with plastic (although that's actually pretty effective although also pretty ugly), what can you do?

Storm windows, my friend. Storm windows. Storms cost a fraction of the cost of whole window replacements, and can be custom fitted to either the outside your existing windows or the inside of your existing windows. Storm windows can work with both standard and non-standard windows. Mr. Energy's house is almost 100 years old and although the windows in his house are huge and beautiful, when he moved in they were also tremendously leaky. Instead of replacing the windows, he got custom-fitted interior storms. Custom storms will cost more than standard storms, of course, but for a historic home they're crucial to maintaining the home's historic integrity. And for a non-historic home, storms are a very cost-effective way to make a huge impact on your home's energy use.

"Mr. Energy" is the collaborative effort of Mark and Adrienne Bashista, co-owners of Home Performance NC, an energy audit and weatherization contractor serving the greater Triangle area. Contact them at 919.360.1570 and see their website at [www.homeperformancenc.com](http://www.homeperformancenc.com)



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