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Refrigerator Maintenance Tips for Energy Efficiency

Get more from your refrigerator's energy use

Your refrigerator (or refrigerator-freezer, since most people buy a combination unit) is the only appliance that works continuously in your home—day after day, all year long. According to ENERGY STAR®, that makes it the largest single user of electricity in your kitchen—especially if it's an older unit using two or three times as much electricity as models available today. So, it's essential to keep the refrigerator running at peak efficiency—and to help everyone in your family recognize that they can have a significant impact on the amount of electricity it consumes. Incidentally, most of these ideas apply to upright or chest-style freezers too.

Use a dollar to save a few more bucks

To check for air leaks in refrigerator door gaskets, close the door on a dollar bill or strip of paper in several locations around the perimeter of each door. If you can easily remove the bill (or it falls out), the gasket needs to be adjusted—or, more likely, replaced. Also, perform a visual check of the gaskets, looking for breaks or deformed areas that may not be sealing correctly—or traces of mildew that indicate air leaks.

Think efficiency!

- Keep the refrigerator door closed.
- Every time you open the door, about 30 percent of the cool air tumbles out.
- Check the temperature in the refrigerator and freezer.
- Leave an appliance (or outdoor) thermometer in each compartment overnight. The refrigerator temperature should be 35-38F degrees; the freezer temperature should be 0-5F degrees.
- Keep your refrigerator and freezer compartments full.
- Food (and even containers filled with water or ice) will retain the cold temperatures better than empty spaces. As a result, the compressor will run less often.
- Make sure the door gasket seals completely by gently pushing on the door. Check the door visually too.
- Clean the condenser coils once or twice a year.
- After unplugging the unit, pull it away from the wall and use a vacuum cleaner or soft brush to remove dust from the condenser coils underneath (or on the back of) the appliance.

Let your refrigerator breathe.

- To work at peak efficiency, the refrigerator needs plenty of ventilation space around it to release the hot air produced during cooling cycles. Prevent heat and dust buildup that will cause your unit to run more often by leaving at least three inches of open space on all sides and the top of the refrigerator's cabinet (Don't use those spaces to store items such as step stools, flattened cardboard boxes, TV trays, or brooms, and avoid using the top of the refrigerator as a storage spot as well).
- Move your refrigerator to a cooler location.
- Keep your refrigerator away from heat sources such as furnace ducts, baseboard heaters, the dishwasher, and cooking appliances. Also, make sure the sun doesn't shine directly on it through a window or door.
- Allow cooked foods to cool before putting them in the refrigerator.

- Adding hot foods to the refrigerator will make the compressor run over time to compensate for the higher temperatures. Use shallow containers so the foods will cool more quickly.
- Use lids or tops on all food storage containers.
- Moisture from foods and liquids evaporates in the refrigerator compartment, causing the compressor to run longer.
- Turn off the "power saver" or "winter/summer" switch; this switch is designed to prevent condensation from forming on the outside of the cabinet during the summer. Leave this feature off unless you discover you really need it.

Some refrigerator and freezer maintenance chores—such as defrosting the freezer, cleaning condenser coils, or replacing some door gaskets— are easily handled by a competent home do-it-yourselfer. But if your refrigerator or freezer won't hold the correct temperature, is making strange noises, or just isn't operating correctly, call a professional service technician for help. Jobs such as recharging the coolant, replacing the compressor, or repairing control units are best left to the pros.