

## Homes & Real estate

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### Chill with cool rebates for most efficient fridges

When shopping for a refrigerator, make sure you consider both the purchase cost and operating cost.



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**Ecoconsumer**

It stands in every kitchen, just chilling out. Our refrigerator is indispensable, yet we take it for granted.

But today a fridge does more than just keep food cold. Modern refrigerators have evolved into efficient, high-tech machines that can help us conserve energy, reduce waste and save money.

#### One purchase, two costs

Refrigerators and freezers consume about a sixth of all electricity in a typical American home, according to the state of California's Consumer Energy Center. Older models use more electricity than any other household appliance.

When shopping for a refrigerator, make sure you consider both the purchase cost and operating cost. Refrigerators and many other appliances carry a bright yellow EnergyGuide label, required by the federal government. Use it to compare energy use for various models. For example, it might say, "Estimated Yearly Operating Cost \$44."

If you don't see that EnergyGuide label on a store-display model, ask a sales associate. You can also usually look it up on the manufacturer's website.

#### Cool utility programs

If your current refrigerator is more than 12 years old, consider replacing it with a more energy-efficient model. Though it may seem wasteful to ditch an appliance that still performs well, in this case it makes sense both financially and environmentally. Newer models generally consume much less energy.

Regional utilities have recently amped up their efforts to encourage customers to replace older refrigerators. Seattle City Light, Puget Sound Energy (PSE) and the Snohomish County Public Utility District each have refrigerator rebate or incentive promotions, such as \$50 rebates.

PSE has a hot new program that provides you with a new Energy Star-rated refrigerator at no charge, if you give up a refrigerator manufactured before 1993. Your old unit has to be your main refrigerator in current operation, among other qualifications, and the new one they give you is a basic model.

This offer was extended to Kitsap County residents earlier this year and is currently available to PSE residential-electric customers in King and Pierce counties through June 30, while supplies last. This deal will be offered to PSE customers in Island, Whatcom, Skagit, Kittitas and Thurston counties later this year.

Although PSE is a private company and not a government utility, this refrigerator-giveaway program has been criticized. Customers who recently bought a similar fridge with their own money seem especially miffed.

But PSE officials say the program cost effectively reduces demands on the energy-distribution system and benefits all its customers, since it helps PSE delay the construction of new power-generating facilities.

Utility programs always include recycling of the old fridge. Refrigerators and freezers must be recycled, since federal law says the refrigerant they contain needs to be captured. Ask your retailer to take back your old unit for recycling.

### **Frigid features**

Before you start shopping for a fridge, consult impartial resources such as Consumer Reports. To choose the size and type you need, consider the number of people in your household and the way you buy, cook, store and freeze food.

“Side-by-side” models, with adjoining refrigerator and freezer compartments, typically consume at least 10 percent more energy than top-freezer models of a similar size.

Purchasing a refrigerator loaded with fancy features, such as dual ice makers, may increase the likelihood of costly repairs later. Instead consider features that help you save energy, like LED (light-emitting diode) interior lighting.

Some new refrigerators provide cleverly designed shelving and other innovative systems that make your food more accessible and visible, or preserve food better, helping to reduce food waste.

### **Go with the flow**

Improve the energy efficiency of your existing refrigerator with a few simple steps. Keep it at least half full of food when you can, but don't pack the fridge or freezer with so much food that air flow is restricted.

Allow air to circulate on the outside as well, by leaving two inches of space between the refrigerator and your walls or cabinets.

Wrap or cover foods and liquids in the fridge, since uncovered foods give off moisture and make the compressor work harder. Let hot foods cool a bit before putting them in the refrigerator.

That faithful, utilitarian behemoth in the kitchen deserves more thought than we typically give it. After all, it's the appliance that feeds us.

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