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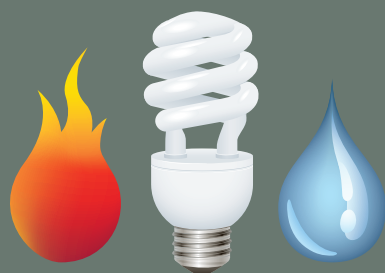
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About EWON

The Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW (EWON) provides an independent way of resolving customer complaints about all electricity and gas suppliers in New South Wales and some water suppliers. Our service is free, fair and independent.

Contact EWON

FREECALL	1800 246 545*
	Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm
FREEFAX	1800 812 291
FREEPOST	Reply Paid 86550
	Sydney South NSW 1234
INTERPRETER	131 450
TTY/VOICE	133 677
EMAIL	omb@ewon.com.au
WEBSITE	www.ewon.com.au

*If you are calling from a mobile phone, let us know and we will call you back.

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Using more energy or water

Increased usage is a common factor in many high bills. Below are some common causes of increased usage.

Adding or replacing appliances

Replacing or installing new appliances can impact on usage. Research the efficiency of an appliance before you buy it. Certain appliances such as air conditioners, oil filled column heaters, plasma televisions, pools or under floor heating can use a lot of energy.

Faulty appliances

Faulty appliances can have a significant impact on your bills. This is especially the case with faulty hot water systems. Hot water accounts for around one third of a household's energy use. Check to ensure your hot water service is working properly.

Gas or water leak

If there is a gas or water leak on your side of the meter, you will have to pay for any excess usage. Contact your retailer or the network operator for advice – emergency numbers will be listed on your bills or in the front of the telephone book.

If you are a tenant, you may have to pay for excess usage. Contact your landlord immediately to report a problem. If you have a dispute with your landlord about a high bill, contact NSW Fair Trading on 133 220 or a Tenants Advice and Advocacy Service (visit www.tenants.org.au to find your local service).

Public housing tenants should phone Housing NSW on 1300 468 746 to report a fault.

Larger household

Additional housemates, guests or a new baby in the household can mean more energy and water is used for heating, cooling and washing.

Moving to a new property

Even if all your appliances are the same, your bills may be different in another property. This may be because:

- you move into a strata building with a common hot water system
- the new property doesn't have an off-peak hot water system
- the meter reads usage on a 'time of use' basis rather than at a flat rate
- you change retailers.

To make sure you haven't been billed for what the previous residents used, check the start date on your bill against the date you moved in.

Seasonal changes

Winter and summer bills are typically higher for households because of the heating and cooling appliances used. Running a heater or an air conditioner throughout the day and overnight can contribute to a high bill.

General tips

- Open an account when you move in to avoid disconnection and additional fees.
- Be sure that the meter reader has access to your meter. If there is an access obstacle such as a locked gate or a dog at your premises, you must come to an arrangement with your network provider about meter readings, eg providing self-reads or a key, or making appointments for special meter reads.
- Living in a sharehouse? Make sure everyone agrees on who will pay the bills.
- When closing an account, give the retailer a forwarding address so they can send you a final bill. If you have an unpaid debt, you may end up with a default listing on your credit report.
- Be aware of your energy and water use.

Charges on your bill

As well as increased usage, there may be reasons why your bill is high. Check your bill for the following:

Arrears

In addition to the current charges, your bill may include arrears from a previous period or an outstanding debt from a previous property.

Change in tariff

For customers on standing offers, retailers can change prices once every six months. For market officers, the frequency of price changes will depend on the contract terms.

Catch up bill

You may be sent a backbill or 'catch up bill' if an error was identified in your previous bill. This may have happened because:

- your usage was under estimated
- your meter was read incorrectly
- your bill was calculated incorrectly.

However, a retailer can only recover charges for 9 months prior to advising you that you were undercharged.

If you receive a backbill due to undercharging, you can ask the retailer for an equal amount of time to pay the backbill.

If you don't allow access to the meter and you receive a catch up bill, there is no limit on the length of time the retailer can backbill you.

Fees and charges

Your bill may also include a security deposit or service fee, for example a meter test fee or repair call.

Longer billing period

If there is a delay in issuing your bill, it could mean that you are billed for a longer period than usual and the amount will be higher than normal.

Customers on a standard regulated energy contract should receive a bill every three months. If you have a negotiated energy contract, the billing frequency may be different.

The billing frequency for water customers can vary between providers.

Your appliances

How often you use an appliance, along with its efficiency, can have a large impact on your bill. Inefficient appliances, particularly those used for heating or cooling, can be expensive to run. Contact your retailer to discuss the running costs of your appliances. Some retailers also offer energy or water audits, which can help you identify where you can save money.

Appliances with timers or standby

Electrical appliances with timers, thermostat controls or standby options will continue to use energy unless they're turned off at the power point. If you're not using the appliance, or you're planning on going away, turn it off.

No Interest Loan Schemes (NILS)

Low income customers can apply for NILS to help purchase or replace household items. NILS is offered by some NSW community agencies. To find an agency phone 1800 509 994 or visit www.nilsnswfindascheme.org.au

Meter readings

If you think your meter wasn't read correctly, you can ask your retailer to do a special read. If you are concerned your meter isn't working properly, you can ask your retailer to test the meter.

In both cases, the retailer can charge you a fee for these services. These fees will be refunded if the reading is found to be inaccurate or the meter faulty.

Who reads the meter?

The network operator is responsible for reading your meter and sending the data to your retailer.

With electricity and gas supply, a network operator must do an actual meter read once every twelve months.

You are responsible for ensuring your meter can be accessed. Talk to your retailer if this is a problem at your property, as they can provide you with options. For example, they may make an appointment with you for a special read or allow you to do self-reads.

Keep track of your meter readings

To be sure you only pay for what you use, read your meter when you move in or out of a property. Keep this information, along with your bills and any correspondence from the retailer.

Estimated bills

If your bill is estimated, you may have been charged too little for your usage. Once an actual meter read is taken, you will be sent a catch up bill. This can mean your bill is much higher than normal.

If your usage has been estimated, it should be clearly stated on your bill. Note that bills based on self-reads are also marked as estimated.

Why was the bill estimated?

According to the law, the network operator can provide an estimate to your retailer if they can't read your meter. However, they can only estimate usage for a period falling within twelve months of the last actual meter read.

The estimate will be based on your historical meter data. For example, it may be based on your consumption at a similar time the previous year. If that data isn't available, your estimate will be based on the average daily consumption for a similar type of customer, for a similar period.

Contact your retailer if you're not sure why your bill was estimated.

Disputing a high bill

If you receive an unexpected high bill, contact your retailer first. Tell them your concerns and ask them to explain the charges on the bill.

If they can't explain the bill to you straight away they may offer (or you can ask them) to do a full investigation.

Not satisfied with the result?

Contact EWON for help. We can conduct our own investigation into the accuracy of your bill. If we don't find anything wrong, we will explain how we reached our decision. We can also



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assist you to negotiate a payment plan with the retailer so you can pay the bill over time.

Keep making payments

Billing investigations may take time to resolve, so try to pay the part of the bill not in dispute. That is, pay your regular quarterly amount. This will help you stay on top of your bills and show the retailer you are acting in good faith. For example, if your bill is usually \$380 and the high bill is \$750, you could pay \$380 while the retailer or EWON conducts an investigation.

Ask about payment options

If you can't pay your bill, ask your retailer about:

- an extension or payment plan
- financial assistance available
- their customer hardship program.

If you can't negotiate an affordable payment plan with your retailer, contact EWON.

CASE STUDY

Customer receives unexpectedly high winter bill

Dan was shocked to receive a \$593 winter bill when his bill for the same period last year was \$375. He called his retailer to dispute the bill and was told the difference was due to a rise in his electricity rate. Dan wasn't satisfied with this explanation – he believed he had used less energy this year and expected a bill of around \$450, allowing for the pricing increase – so he asked EWON to check the accuracy of his bill.

EWON reviewed the billing data from his supplier and found his consumption had increased by 37%. Combined with the price rise, this appeared to account for the higher bill. We discussed Dan's usage with him and determined the increase was most likely due to the oil filled column heater he had been running for 6-8 hours each day. We also referred Dan to energy saving information to help him keep his consumption down in the future.

Low cost energy and water saving tips

Being efficient with the energy and water you use is not only good for the environment, it will help you avoid high bills and save money.

General tips

- Encourage everyone in your household to save energy and water
- Know how much your appliances cost to run. Contact your energy or water retailer, or the appliance manufacturer for more information
- Don't leave the lights on if they're not needed
- Turn off chargers at the powerpoint
- Take a short shower (4 minutes) rather than a bath, and fit a water efficient showerhead
- Fix leaking taps
- Don't keep the tap running while brushing your teeth
- Wash vegetables in a bucket or bowl and use this water on your plants or garden

- Collect any clean shower water instead of letting it go down the drain. Use this water on your plants, to wash your car or to flush the toilet
- Hang heavyweight, close fitting curtains to provide insulation
- If you are heating or cooling your house, keep doors and windows closed
- Use a door snake or rolled up towel to stop air movement under doors
- Repair door or window seals

Fridges and freezers

- Keep the seals clean and replace them if they are worn or cracked. If the seals are letting air escape your fridge or freezer will be working twice as hard and drawing more energy to stay at the required temperature
- Place your fridge in a cool spot, out of the sun and away from ovens
- Ensure there is space around the fridge for ventilation
- Defrost your freezer at least twice a year
- Replace old or inefficient fridges as they can be expensive to run
- Consider getting rid of a second fridge or only turn it on when it's really needed

Cooking tips

- Use the minimum amount of water needed in pots and use the lid where possible
- Use your jug or kettle to boil water, rather than the stove
- Don't overfill your kettle with water, only put in what you need

Laundry

- Use cold water where possible
- Soak clothes to help remove stains and reduce washing time
- Use a clothes line or clothes horse to dry your clothes, rather than a dryer
- Never place dripping wet clothes in a dryer, spin dry them first
- Don't overload the dryer
- Clean the lint filter on your dryer after each load

Heating

- Lay rugs on bare floors to add insulation
- Don't use your oven to heat your home
- Wear warm clothes rather than increase the temperature on your heater
- Don't overheat the house in winter. The more you increase the temperature, the more it will cost
- Don't heat empty rooms
- Don't leave the heater on when no one's home

- Avoid buying heaters that are expensive to run. For example, oil column heaters can be costly if they're not used in the right sized room or if they're left on for hours.

Did you know?

Increasing the temperature setpoint by just one degree in warmer months and lowering it by one degree in cooler months can reduce your power use by as much as 10%

Cooling

- Use fans rather than an air conditioner, they are much cheaper to run
- Regularly clean the filter on your air conditioner
- Don't overcool the house in summer. The more you lower the temperature, the more it will cost
- Only cool main rooms (there's no need to cool a hallway, bathroom or laundry)

How can EWON help?

If you are not satisfied with your retailer's response to your high bill enquiry, you can make a complaint to EWON. We can check to see if you have been billed appropriately for what you have used. We can also:

- try and get you more time to pay
- negotiate an affordable payment plan with your retailer
- refer you to agencies that offer financial assistance
- provide you with information on how to save money on your bills.

Contact EWON on **1800 246 545** or visit www.ewon.com.au. If you are calling from a mobile phone, let us know and we'll call you back.



For more energy and water saving tips contact your retailer or visit:
www.energy.nsw.gov.au/customers
www.environment.nsw.gov.au

Tips for resolving complaints

- 1** If you have a problem with your supplier, contact them first and explain your situation. Keep records of letters, names, times and dates.
- 2** If the call centre staff can't help you, ask to speak to a supervisor.
- 3** If the problem isn't fixed, contact **EWON on freecall 1800 246 545** or visit www.ewon.com.au to make a complaint.