



Summer Power Outages: Safety Tips and Consumer Rights

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During the summer, the last thing you want to think about is being without electricity. The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), your residential utility consumer advocate, brings you information about your rights and tips for staying safe during a power outage.

Consumer rights and responsibilities

When your electricity goes out, you should call your electric company immediately to report the outage. Remember that during widespread outages it may take several minutes before you will be able to talk directly to a company representative. If you cannot get through to a company representative, you should be able to report the outage through the company's automated telephone system.

During the outage, unplug all major appliances that are power sensitive, such as computers, stereos and televisions. This will protect these items from a possible power surge when the power comes back on. Leave one lamp plugged in and turned on to alert you when your service is restored.

In Ohio, consumers are not entitled to credits for the time that their service is out.

Safety measures

Some consumers may consider purchasing a generator if they experience long, frequent outages. When purchasing a generator, discuss the following factors with a salesperson:

- ▶ Price
- ▶ Type of fuel needed to run the generator
- ▶ Length of time it can run
- ▶ Types of uses, such as appliances, sump pumps or home security systems

No matter which type of generator you buy or how you are using it, there are several safety tips you should follow.

- ▶ Generators should never be used inside the home or an attached garage due to carbon monoxide build up. Carbon monoxide is an odorless, colorless gas that can be fatal. Symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning are similar to the flu, making it difficult to diagnose at first. Low levels of exposure can cause nausea, dizziness, muscle aches and

weakness. If it is suspected that there is any level of carbon monoxide in the home, residents should leave immediately and call the fire department from a neighbor's house. To avoid health problems from carbon monoxide, have at least one carbon monoxide detector that has battery backup so it continues to work even when the electricity is off.

- ▶ Never exceed the rated capacity listed on the generator. The capacity is typically measured in watts. Consumers should find out the wattage used by the appliances they wish to run off the generator. With a 4,000 to 5,000 watt generator, consumers can typically run a refrigerator, sump pump, furnace fan and several lights.
- ▶ Start the generator with the largest appliance first, then add additional items one at a time.

Consumers with medical needs

Electric companies take certain factors into consideration when restoring power during an outage. In some cases, electric companies can give preference to individuals who rely on life support devices, such as respirators, ventilators or other medical equipment. However, there is no guarantee that these customers will receive power immediately, and they should always have a backup plan in place.

There are important steps that these customers should take to ensure that their power is restored as quickly as possible.

1. Register with the electric company. Electric companies offer a program that alerts them about customers with critical needs. By law, all companies are required to maintain and update their list of critical customers annually. Customers need to send in a letter or fill out an application from their electric company stating that they are on life support. The customer's doctor also must verify his or her need for immediate power. Caution: Being on this list will not guarantee that power will be restored immediately. Customers should always have a backup plan.
2. Have an emergency backup plan. In preparation for a power outage, consumers with a medical need for electricity should have available a contact list of

family or friends, an emergency supply of oxygen, a battery-powered radio, a flashlight, a landline or cellular phone and a place to go until power is restored.

3. Consider using a backup generator and registering it. A generator will provide electricity during an outage. Always rely on a professional electrician to set it up. Properly installing a generator will protect it from damage and prevent a backflow of electrical current into the utility lines that may injure service professionals. Never use a generator inside the home or in an attached garage due to carbon monoxide build up. Customers should call their electric company to inform them that they have a generator. Learn more about generators at <http://www.cpsc.gov/cpscpub/pubs/portgen.html>

Electrical outage myths

When the lights go out there are many things for a consumer to think about, like reporting the outage and locating necessities such as batteries, a wireless radio and other supplies. Below, the OCC clarifies some common myths about power outages in the home to help consumers be better prepared.

MYTH: During an electric outage, homes with seniors and young children are given priority when restoring power.

FACT: Typically, electric companies do not establish a priority for restoration efforts based on the age of those in the home. However, customers in homes with anyone requiring electricity to run medical equipment may be able to join a list of customers with critical needs. Caution: Being on this list will not guarantee that power will be restored immediately. Customers should always have a backup plan.

MYTH: The electric company is required to pay for or replace any food that spoils as a result of a power outage.

FACT: There is currently no requirement that the company compensate customers for any food lost due to an outage. To keep food safe,

consumers without refrigeration should:

- ▶ Use foods first that may spoil, such as dairy products and meat. Once these foods are no longer cold to the touch they should be thrown out.
- ▶ Keep refrigerator and freezer doors closed to conserve cold air.
- ▶ Place perishable foods in a cooler packed with ice.

MYTH: After the power goes out, the furnace or air conditioner will continue to run and heat or cool a home.

FACT: Whether it is a natural gas or electric furnace, the fan inside the furnace that distributes heat through the home runs on electricity and will not work during an outage. Both room air conditioners and central air units require electricity to cool the home. When an outage occurs in colder months, consumers should close doors to any rooms not being used to prevent heat loss. In warmer months, consumers should close their blinds and curtains to keep the home cool.

MYTH: Cordless telephones will work during a power outage.

FACT: During an electricity outage, cordless home telephones will not work. Consumers that want the ability to place a telephone call from their home or need access to emergency services must have a traditional telephone where the handset is always attached to the base. This traditional, corded telephone will allow for calls during an outage, unless the telephone network also is out. Consumers who use their Internet connection to make telephone calls also should be aware that this service will be interrupted if the power goes out. Cellular telephones might work during an outage.

Who to call

Consumers can call the OCC toll-free at 1-877-PICKOCC (1-877-742-5622) with any questions about their rights relating to a power outage.

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), the residential utility consumer advocate, represents the interests of 4.5 million households in proceedings before state and federal regulators and in the courts.

The state agency also educates consumers and responds to their questions about electric, natural gas, telephone and water issues. To receive utility information, brochures or schedule a presentation, residential consumers may call 1-877-PICKOCC (1-877-742-5622) toll free in Ohio or visit the OCC website at www.pickocc.org.

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel is an equal opportunity employer and provider of services.

For additional information from the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel:

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