



HIGH ELECTRICITY AND NATURAL GAS BILLS

Information for residential and small business customers

Have you received an unusually high electricity or natural gas bill? Maybe your bill has gone up and stayed up? This fact sheet will help you work out why.

Billing and credit are the most common issues the Energy and Water Ombudsman (EWOV) deals with — usually related to high bills. All sorts of reasons can cause your electricity or gas bills to be high.

Important: If you're going to have trouble paying your bill, ring your electricity or gas company straight away. You can then work out a new payment due date or an affordable payment plan to help avoid disconnection of your supply. You can also ask to be included in the company's hardship program. Remember that you need to pay part of what you owe, usually the amount that is not in dispute.

Does your high bill include previous amounts you haven't paid?

Did you receive your last bill? Did you pay all of it?

If you didn't receive a bill, or you only paid part of it, this high bill probably includes an amount you still owe.

If this has been happening for a while, the amount you owe will be building up. If that's the case, you should contact your company to arrange a payment plan to pay it off. Your company can also offer suggestions to help you manage paying your future bills.

Has your price changed?

Did it increase? Did you change it by taking up a new offer, such as flexible pricing?

Compare the rates on your current bill with previous bills and check whether your retailer included a note about an increase in charges.

If you took up a new offer, check whether the rates differ compared with your previous rates. The same applies if your meter was exchanged with a new Smart Meter. Are you still charged on a peak and off-peak tariff or a time-of-use tariff?

Have your recent bills been based on estimates of your usage?

Your company may estimate your usage but it must try its best to read your meter at least once a year (for more information see also EWOV's Fact Sheet 3: Estimated bills and meter access)

To see whether your bills have been estimated, check your last few bills for the word 'estimated', or the letter 'e' (meaning estimated) beside the meter readings.

Estimated bills are usually based on the amount of electricity or gas you've used in the past. This may be more, or less, than the amount you actually used in the period that was estimated. After your meter is read, you'll be charged

for any usage above the estimate. Your high bill may include a 'catch-up' amount of this type. If you think your high bill may include 'catch-up' amounts from estimated bills, but you aren't sure, ask your energy company.





Have you used more electricity or gas than you usually do?

You can use your bills to keep an eye on your property's average usage over time

Compare the average daily use figure on your high bill with the average daily use figures on your previous bills (including the bill you received for the same time last year).

If it's a lot higher, have you:

- been at the property more?
- used some appliances more?
- had people staying with you?
- bought new equipment or appliances?
- undertaken some renovations?
- used electric tools more? Is your usage still high?

You can use your meter to check whether your usage has increased and come back down, or increased and stayed high:

1. Take a meter reading at a set time on a typical day for your household (be careful not to change your usual usage pattern)
2. Take another reading at the same time the next day
3. The difference between the two will be the amount you used in the last day (24 hours)
4. Compare this with the 'average daily use' figure on your high bill

What else can cause high bills?

Some appliances or equipment use more electricity or gas than others. How and when you use them can also increase your bills

Here are some examples (with the bills they may affect in brackets):

- Using an oil column heater or an electric wall heater (electricity)
- Running a large, old or faulty refrigerator or one that doesn't shut properly (electricity)
- Leaving the TV, DVD, video or CD player on standby (electricity)
- A faulty hot water service or setting a high water temperature (electricity)
- Using a hot water booster or day/night switch a lot at the peak rate (electricity)

- Holes in the ducts of central heating systems (gas)
- A faulty thermostat on your hot water service or heater (electricity or gas)
- Having no blinds or curtains (electricity or gas)
- Having a gas leak (gas) - check whether your meter is still running when all appliances are turned off or if you smell gas

Do you need more help?

This fact sheet will give you a good start but here are some ways to get more information

- EWOV's website (ewov.com.au) has links to useful information including high bill and energy efficiency videos.
- The Victorian Government's Victorian Energy Compare website (compare.switchon.vic.gov.au) has useful energy tools and an independent price comparator.
- Sustainability Victoria has an information line—**1300 363 744** and website: sustainability.vic.gov.au where you can find ideas and information for energy efficient homes.
- A registered electrician or plumber/gas fitter can also give you advice.

What if you contact your company and you're not satisfied with its response?

Don't be put off

- If the first person you speak with can't help you, ask to speak with someone at a higher level (e.g. a manager or supervisor).
- If you aren't satisfied with the action your company takes to address your concerns, you can contact EWOV for further assistance.

EWOV's high bill investigations

How we investigate high bills

EWOV's investigation into a high bill is a process of determining whether your company has contributed to the causes of the high bill. It's not always possible to pinpoint the exact cause of a higher than expected bill, rather it's often only possible to identify what is not the cause.

The aim of EWOV's investigation is to confirm you have been billed accurately with the meter correctly recording usage. This means that a high bill investigation is a process of eliminating the possible causes of a high bill.

