Vampire Loads Waste Energy

Vampire loads, phantom loads, idle current, wall warts, plug loads or standby power; are all terms for electricity consumed when devices are not in use. If you have a cell phone, have you ever noticed that your charger stays warm even when you are not charging your phone with it? That's because it is still drawing electricity. As little as 5 percent of the energy used by cell phone chargers is actually used for charging with the rest wasted when left plugged into the wall, but not the phone. Examples of other devices with vampire loads include battery chargers, answering machines, fax machines, printers, copiers, power adaptors, wireless phones, powered speakers, appliances (washers, dryers, dishwashers, TV's) with displays, touch screens or remote control, video game systems and cable modems. Although individual vampire loads may be small, they can really add up, since they are lurking day and night. Alan Meier, a staff scientist at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (LBNL) noted that many household appliances are never fully switched off, but spend most of the time in a standby mode. Standby power, by current estimates, account for approximately 10 percent of total residential electricity consumption in America. At a typical home, 45 watts from vampire loads over a year is equivalent to operating a new 21 cu. ft. Energy Star refrigerator for 10 months. Some standby loads are necessary, such as a security system or wireless router, or part of large appliance that cannot be easily unplugged, but smaller devices can be completely turned off or unplugged.

What should you do?

At Work

- Unplug or shut off main power switch for devices that are infrequently used
- Use a power strip to shut off your computer monitor, chargers, task light and other peripherals each evening and for prolonged periods away from your desk
- Unplug your device chargers from the wall (cell phones, calculators, iPods, tools) when you are not charging the device
- Turn you computer monitor off when away from your desk
- Place printers, fax machines and copy machines in standby after business hours
- Purchase Energy Star appliances and electronics. Look for the brand offering a true "off" switch
- Educate yourself about this subject and share what you learn

At home

- Consider the use of smart strips on all your major electronics ($40). A smart strip senses the current draw of the main device that your accessories are serving. When the TV or PC is turned on, the smart strip energizes the outlets that power DVD players, printers and scanners. A smart strip saves you from having to turn all of the peripheral devices off. Those loads, such as cable modem can be plugged into the non-switch outlets. All you have to do is turn on the main device and all of its "followers" will come on as well.
- Use lower-cost power strips ($9) to shut off your computer and its peripherals, home entertainment equipment and other groups of electronic equipment each evening and when not in use.
- Use lower-cost plug-in timers ($6) to turn off Cable/Satellite boxes with DVR capability during the middle of the night
- Unplug your device chargers from the wall (cell phones, calculators, iPods, tools) when you are not charging the device
- Obtain a watt meter to test your home appliances, such as P3 International's P4400 Kill-A Watt. These easy-to-use meters ($30) and can be shared with friends and neighbors.
- Buy Energy Star appliances that feature low standby energy consumption
- When your appliances will not be used for an extended period of time, unplug those you can. Read your owner's manual before taking any action that may affect the operation of your appliance or your warranty.
- Investigate a wireless home energy control system