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ABOUT YOUR HOUSE

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BACKUP POWER FOR YOUR HOME

You rely on many appliances and systems in your home for your health, comfort and security. Most depend completely on utility-supplied electricity.

It makes sense to have a backup system that will keep your family comfortable and your home safe in a power failure.

These Top Ten Tips are a brief guide to backup systems. Six basic types of backup systems are described in Table 1 (please see insert).

1. Plan

Careful preparation is essential to select, buy and install a backup system. Don't leave it to the last minute—you and your family have to learn how to use the system.

And during a power failure, you may not be able to find suitable, reasonably priced equipment, or have it installed properly. Keep the system simple so you and your family can operate and maintain it. Your emergency system must work reliably when needed.

2. Keep the heat in

In most of Canada, the main purpose of a backup system is to keep the house warm (and sometimes to keep the basement dry). You have to be able to keep heat in, prevent unnecessary air infiltration, and prevent pipes from freezing. The starting point is proper insulation and air sealing, before you consider your backup power needs.

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3. Change to efficient appliances

Your backup system will do the most good if it is powering efficient appliances. Use an electrician's ammeter to find out how much power each appliance uses—its current draw in amps. The energy requirements of some appliances will surprise you.

Replace the inefficient appliances with efficient appliances. Change to energy-efficient light bulbs like compact fluorescents. When buying



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new equipment, get the most efficient possible—for example, an energy-efficient refrigerator or a lower-volume, smaller horsepower well pump or sump pump. Make sure your furnace fan motor is the most efficient available.

When you use a backup system you must manage your electrical load. You will have to operate even your most efficient appliances as little as possible so that you have essential power as long as possible.

4. If your house is all-electric...

Don't use a backup generator to heat your house if it is all-electric, or to power resistance heaters, such as baseboards and fan heaters (a very poor choice—only 20 per cent efficiency).

Install a wood, oil, natural gas, or propane stove that uses a chimney. Or install a pellet, oil, natural gas or propane stove that vents through the wall.

Fan-assisted air circulation makes auxiliary heating devices more effective. You may need backup power for a fan, stove motors and pumps.

You must install a hearth and chimney for a wood stove, and have a supply of dry wood. You will need backup power for a pellet stove—but a pellet stove uses a less-costly through-the-wall chimney. Propane, natural gas heaters and oil heaters use through-the-wall chimneys, and need a reliable fuel source. Check delivery with your local fuel supplier

Some oil-fired furnaces and space heaters can provide both hot water and space heat. Some of these appliances are suitable for cooking and keeping food warm.

Most fireplaces are not very effective. They may heat you and one room. But they suck air from other rooms and actually cool the rest of the house. Many fireplaces are not built for continuous use, or are in poor condition, and can be a real fire hazard.

5. Decide what needs power

Your backup must provide power for the circuits you depend on for comfort, safety and security.

Decide what you must keep running in the event of a power outage. You may find you don't need an elaborate backup. If you only need your sump pump, a small gasoline-powered pump could be simpler and cheaper than a full backup system.

Critical loads are the essential loads. They might include lights, refrigerator-freezer, microwave, sump pump, furnace, well pump, garage door opener, and the home office.

Your backup power system's capacity is the maximum power draw (in kilowatts) of all the fixtures and appliances that have to be served at one time, including higher startup loads.

Remember: ventilation and fresh air supply can also be important loads.

To determine the size of your backup power system:

- Identify the critical loads that you really need, and check whether they can be safely served by alternatives that don't require electricity. For example, a properly vented stove fuelled by wood, oil, or gas could substitute for your furnace.
- Total the wattage of the lights and appliances on the circuits you'd like to power
- Check the labels or owner's manuals for each appliance's rating
- Add about 25 per cent as a reserve for the startup power needed for most electrical devices. This may not be enough for some furnaces and well pumps. Motor startups can draw as much as three to five times more power, especially from cold—making a 2,500-watt generator borderline for starting an 800 watt furnace motor (ask about "slow start" motor options that draw less startup current.) The total will probably be between 1,500 and 5,000 watts. However a basic system for efficient lights and a radio will require much less, say 100-300 watts.

6. Choose a backup system

Some of the systems (see Backup Power Systems table) include battery storage and a battery charger and an inverter. The inverter converts 12 volt DC battery power to standard 110 or 220 volt AC power. These systems can also recharge the batteries

using solar panels, a generator and your vehicle, or your vehicle alone (but remember that unless you have an RV your car battery is not a deep cycle type and should not be allowed to go flat).

The more expensive systems can power an entire, energy-efficient house

7. Hire an electrician

An electrician or electrical-contractor should install and prepare your backup system to make sure it is safe for your family and your home.

You will need a manual transfer switch to send electricity from either the municipal power supply or your backup to the vital circuits. The switches cost from \$100 to \$230.

Some residential uninterruptible power systems are pre-assembled on wall mounting boards, with all the necessary safety disconnects and code-approved wiring already done.

More sophisticated inverter power panels that automatically flip the transfer switch and start the backup can cost \$3,000 just for the panel with the breakers and an inverter.

It is a good idea for an electrician to check wiring and grounding, and determine if you need spike protection. In rural areas, voltage fluctuations and even over-voltages that can damage sensitive equipment are not uncommon.

Never connect a backup power system without a transfer switch that disconnects your home from the municipal power supply. This is to protect electric utility crews working on your lines.

8. Don't use unvented appliances indoors

Don't use unvented combustion appliances, such as barbecues, cook stoves, fondues, propane or kerosene heaters and lamps inside your house.

They burn up available oxygen. They produce CO₂ (carbon dioxide) and other combustion gases and fumes. Some produce huge quantities of colourless, odourless and deadly carbon monoxide. Sterno cookers, fondues, and charcoal-burning devices are especially dangerous. Never use them indoors.

Room ventilation won't get rid of fumes from unvented appliances. Never use them inside your house.

Use portable propane or naphtha cookstoves, heaters and lamps outside only. There is a very real risk of fire, explosion, asphyxiation or poisoning from fumes.

9. Install smoke and carbon monoxide alarms

Install battery-powered smoke alarms and carbon monoxide alarms. They are inexpensive and reliable and they can save your life. Do you have spare batteries?

10. Test your system regularly

Regularly test your backup system to make sure it can start your critical loads and keep them running. Remember to disconnect your main breaker before starting your backup system, or you can use an auxiliary circuit panel. Auxiliary panels for backup power prevent electrical utility field crews from being electrocuted by your home power systems. They should be activated by a transfer switch and wired by an electrician.

Note that modern inverters can make it possible to use variable speed DC generators which charge batteries directly and use half as much fuel as a constant-speed AC generator. They can produce very high quality AC power, which is crucial for sensitive electronic controls, provided that the inverter is manufactured by an established company and produces sine wave or modified sine wave outputs.

To protect sensitive equipment, such as computers, from power surges generator owners should run these loads with a pure sine wave inverter instead of directly through the generator. If you are counting on your generator or inverter to power critical house systems during a power failure, test beforehand to make sure that the quantity and quality of power produced will handle the appliances you need to run.

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TABLE I: BACKUP POWER SYSTEMS

TYPE OF SYSTEM	WHAT IT RUNS	EXAMPLES OF COSTS	BUYING TIPS
<p>1 Battery Backup with inverter/charger for short blackouts of 12-48 hours \$2,350 example</p>	<p>Essential AC loads only. Furnace, sump pump, well pump, fridge, plus efficient lights, small DC appliances</p>	<p>Battery bank \$725 (16 KWhr) Inverter/charger \$1,400 (1100 Watt) Transfer switch \$225 (50 Amp 240 volt)</p>	<p>Choose deep cycle batteries, best connected in series, not in parallel. Choose a modern inverter/charger of suitable quality and surge capacity</p>
<p>2 Car, RV, or Truck as backup generator plus DC/AC inverter (must be grounded) \$110-5,500</p>	<p>Essential AC loads only. Furnace, sump pump, well pump, fridge, plus efficient lights, even a microwave</p>	<p>300 Watt inverter \$110, engine can be OFF. 1000 Watt inverter \$550, engine must be ON (limited by rating of vehicle components, important not to let car battery run flat) 5,000 Watt truck power system \$5,500</p>	<p>Magazine and Internet searches include Canadian <i>Sol</i> magazine, U.S. <i>Homepower</i> magazine, RV/Trailer/Boat catalogs</p>
<p>3 Single PV panel and battery system Normally DC only, could add small inverter for AC \$885 example</p>	<p>Power for a weekend cabin. Efficient lights, small DC appliances, radio/TV, CD player; cellphone, small pumps/fans, car vacuum, tools.</p>	<p>Solar power kit \$650 (45 Watt) Battery \$125 (220 Amp hr) Inverter \$110 (300 Watt) Excludes costs of DC appliances</p>	<p>Small marine 12 volt water pumps for bilges may be suitable for sumps. Sources include marine, boat, and yacht suppliers, RV/Trailer and auto-truck centres.</p>
<p>4 Twin PV panel and battery system with inverter/charger to convert DC to AC \$3,780 example</p>	<p>Power for a small cottage. (as 3) and some larger AC appliances, such as microwave, vacuum, water pumps</p>	<p>Solar power kit \$2,400 (150 Watt) Battery bank \$580 (700 Amp hr) Inverter \$800 (1750 Watt) Installation costs NOT included</p>	<p>Sources include Canadian solar energy and equipment suppliers, Canadian Solar Industries Association.</p>
<p>5 Portable Generator must be grounded and should be connected via auxiliary breaker panel \$660-\$2,500</p>	<p>Preferably essential AC loads. Furnace, sump pump, well pump, fridge, plus efficient lights and some appliances</p>	<p>500 Watt AC generator \$660 3000 Watt DC generator \$2,200 (including AC inverter) 5000 Watt AC generator \$2,500</p>	<p>Sources include hardware stores, building supply and rental centres, generator sales and service specialists.</p>
<p>6 Fixed Generator Gasoline, diesel, propane. Must be installed by licensed electrician \$3,925 example</p>	<p>Preferably essential AC loads. Furnace, sump pump, well pump, fridge, plus efficient lights and some appliances</p>	<p>6500 Watt AC generator \$3,700 2 cylinder liquid cooled, less noise Transfer switch \$225 (50 Amp 240 volt) Installation costs NOT included</p>	<p>To reduce generator running costs consider adding a battery bank with an inverter/charger (see system 1)</p>

TABLE 2: GENERATOR MAINTENANCE TIPS (typical 5,000 watt gasoline engine)

These instructions are for maintenance of a modern 3,000 to 5,000 watt, air-cooled, gasoline engine generator for residential service. Most points, however, apply to all generators.

Remember: gasoline and diesel fuels require special care for proper and safe storage so they don't become unusable because gums and gels form or they are contaminated by water and dirt. Special additives can prevent these problems.

WARNINGS AND CAUTIONS

- Is your generator wiring safely insulated AND properly grounded?
- Disconnect main breaker (and non-critical circuits) before starting generator.
- Connect auxiliary breaker panel to generator output. Observe correct polarity.
- **Never** refuel engine while it is running. **Fire Hazard!**
- Once you have started your generator, do not start all your appliances at once. Turn them on one at a time. Avoid using the biggest loads simultaneously.
- Most generators are not designed to work inside your home. They should be placed outside, but protected from the weather to avoid carburetor or breather icing.
- A generator should not be left running without someone nearby to supervise. It may overheat and cause a fire. Always have a fire extinguisher nearby.
- If your generator causes a fire, your fire insurance may not pay if your generator was not CSA approved or was not installed by a master electrician.

After first five hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change oil. Use 10W30 motor oil or 5W30. Use synthetic oil to prolong engine life and ease starting in cold weather.
After every 50 hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change oil.
After four months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start engine and run for 15 to 20 minutes with electrical load to maintain engine and generator.
Annual—fall is best	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start engine and run with electrical load until it runs out of fuel—this can take all day. • Refuel with fresh fuel (regular unleaded). • Clean and lubricate battery terminals with wire brush and petroleum jelly if there is corrosion. • Inspect air and fuel filters and fuel shutoff for cleanliness.
Every five years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replace battery, air filter, fuel filter. • Replace fuel lines if deteriorated.
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check oil level with every tank of fuel used. • Use a fuel stabiliser for fuel storage of up to one year. • If not using fuel stabiliser, do not store or use fuel more than one month old (stale gasoline is not a dependable fuel). • Keep generator fuel tank full to reduce condensation in tank. • Keep a spare spark plug and wrench nearby. • Have the generator tuned if it has been used extensively or runs poorly.