



Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

Your Residential Utility Consumer Advocate

CONSUMERS' FACT SHEET

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WHY YOUR POWER MAY GO OUT



From quick flickers of light you might experience in your home to widespread outages that can leave entire cities in the dark, there are many reasons why the power goes out. To understand outages, it's important to know the different components needed to produce and transport power.

There are three main components to producing electricity:

Generation – The production of electricity at a power plant;

Transmission – The high-voltage lines that transport the electricity from the power plant to the utility company's distribution system;

Distribution – The power lines that carry electricity into your home.

If any one of these areas experiences a problem or interruption, it could result in a power outage.

Here are some examples of problems that could cause power outages:

At the power plant

- ▶ Mechanical problems – a boiler or a turbine used to create electricity breaks;
- ▶ Safety shutdowns – problems with the cooling system cause a plant to be shut down;

- ▶ Fuel availability – problems with transporting or delivering fuel could be as simple as a frozen pile of coal.

On the transmission lines

- ▶ Weather-related – storms, ice and wind cause disruptions;
- ▶ Line damage – tree branches, kites, animals and other obstacles can get in the way of power flowing into your community;
- ▶ Overloading – if a transmission line is unable to handle the excess amount of power, an overload can occur.

On the distribution lines

- ▶ Weather conditions are an important factor because many parts of the distribution system are right in consumers' backyards and are more susceptible to damage from falling tree branches;
- ▶ Electricity that is flowing through underground lines also can be interrupted due to moisture or damage caused by deep digging.

Safeguards are built into each part of the electric system to limit the number and duration of power outages. For example, most cities and neighborhoods are able to receive electricity from more than one power line. If the primary line goes down, a secondary line can act as a substitute.

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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 about electric, natural gas, telephone and water issues.

For more information, please visit the OCC website at www.occ.ohio.gov.



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

Taking precautions

You can protect your electronics using surge protectors, which are available in home improvement and appliance stores. In addition, a whole house surge protector installed to the fuse box will help protect the home's entire electrical system.

You should consult your homeowner's or renter's insurance policy to ensure that you would be protected adequately in case a power problem damages electronics in your home.

There is no requirement that the electric utility compensate customers for any food lost because of 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; and
- ▶ Place perishable foods in a cooler packed with ice.

During an electricity outage, cordless home telephones will not work. Consumers who 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 may work during an outage.

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;
- ▶ Amount of time it can run;
- ▶ Types of uses, such as appliances, sump pumps or home security systems.

No matter which type is purchased or how the generator is used, several safety tips should be followed:

- ▶ 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;
- ▶ Generators should never be used inside the home or an attached garage because carbon monoxide can accumulate. Carbon monoxide is a colorless, odorless gas that can be fatal. Install at least one carbon monoxide detector with a battery backup to make yourself aware of carbon monoxide levels in the home.

When consumers experience a power outage, it is important to report it to the local electric utility.