



St. Joseph County Sheriff's Office

Safety Information for Short-Term Power Outages or “Rolling Blackouts”

What is a “Rolling Blackout?”

A rolling blackout occurs when a power company turns off electricity to selected areas to save power. The areas are selected using sophisticated computer programs and models. The blackouts are typically for one hour, then the power is restored and another area is turned off. Hospitals, airport control towers, police stations, and fire departments are often exempt from these rolling blackouts. These blackouts usually occur during peak energy usage times, usually between 4:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. on weekdays, but they can happen at any time of day. Blackouts may affect the same area more than once a day, and may exceed an hour's duration.

How Do I Find Out if My Area Will Have a Rolling Blackout?

Listen to local television, radio, and check the web site of your power company. Usually, rolling blackouts occur when power usage increases, especially during hot weather when many people are using air conditioning to keep cool. Power companies try to give a warning when they will turn off power to an area, but they cannot always do that.

Top Safety Tips for a Blackout

1. Only use a flashlight for emergency lighting. *Never use candles!*
2. Turn off electrical equipment you were using when the power went out.
3. Avoid opening the refrigerator and freezer.
4. Do not run a generator inside a home or garage.
5. If you use a generator, connect the equipment you want to power directly to the outlets on the generator. Do not connect a generator to a home's electrical system.
6. Listen to local radio and television for updated information.

How Can I Prepare Before a Blackout Happens?

- Assemble essential supplies, including:
- Flashlight
- Batteries
- Portable radio
- at least one gallon of water
- a small supply of food.

Due to the extreme risk of fire, do not use candles during a power outage.

- If you have space in your refrigerator or freezer, consider filling plastic containers with water, leaving about an inch of space inside each one. (Remember, water expands as it freezes, so it is important to leave room in the container for the expanded water). Place the containers in the refrigerator and freezer. This chilled or frozen water will help keep food cold if the power goes out, by displacing air that can warm up quickly with water or ice that keeps cold for several hours without additional refrigeration.
- If you use medication that requires refrigeration, most can be kept in a closed refrigerator for several hours without a problem. If unsure, check with your physician or pharmacist.
- If you use a computer, keep files and operating systems backed up regularly. Consider buying extra batteries and a power converter if you use a laptop computer. A power converter allows most laptops (12 volts or less) to be operated from the cigarette lighter of a vehicle. Also, turn off all computers, monitors, printers, copiers, scanners and other devices when they're not being used. That way, if the power goes out, this equipment will have already been safely shut down. Get a high quality surge protector for all of your computer equipment. If you use the computer a lot, such as for a home business, consider purchasing and installing an uninterruptable power supply (UPS). Consult with your local computer equipment dealer about available equipment and costs.
- If you have an electric garage door opener, find out where the manual release lever is located and learn how to operate it. Sometimes garage doors can be heavy, so get help to lift it. If you regularly use the garage as the primary means of entering your home upon return from work, be sure to keep a key to your house with you, in case the garage door will not open.
- If you have a telephone instrument or system at home or at work that requires electricity to work (such as a cordless phone or answering machine), plan for alternate communication, including having a standard telephone handset, cellular telephone, radio, or pager. Remember, too, that some voice mail systems and remote dial-up servers for computer networks may not operate when the power is out where these systems are located. So even if *you* have power, your access to remote technology may be interrupted if the power that serves those areas is disrupted. Check with remote service providers to see if they have backup power systems, and how long those systems will operate.
- Keep your car fuel tank at least half full because gas stations rely on electricity to power their pumps.
- Follow energy conservation measures to keep the use of electricity as low as possible, which can help power company(ies) avoid imposing rolling blackouts.

Specific Information for People With Disabilities

- If you use a battery-operated wheelchair, life-support system, or other power-dependent equipment, call your power company before rolling blackouts happen. Many utility companies keep a list and map of the locations of power-dependent customers in case of an emergency. Ask them what alternatives are available in your area. Contact the customer service department of your local utility company(ies) to learn if this service is available in your community.
- If you use a motorized wheelchair or scooter, have an extra battery. A car battery also can be used with a wheelchair but will not last as long as a wheelchair's deep-cycle battery. If available, store a lightweight manual wheelchair for backup.
- If you are Blind or have a visual disability, store a talking or Braille clock or large-print timepiece with extra batteries.
- If you are Deaf or have a hearing loss, consider getting a small portable battery-operated television set. Emergency broadcasts may give information in American Sign Language (ASL) or open captioning.

Using a Generator

If you are considering obtaining a generator, get advice from a licensed professional, such as an electrician. Make sure the generator is listed with Underwriters Laboratories or a similar organization. Some municipalities, Air Quality Districts, or states have “air quality permit” requirements. A licensed electrician will be able to give you more information on these matters. Always plan to keep the generator outdoors — *never* operate it inside, including the basement or garage. Do not hook up a generator directly to your home’s wiring. The safest thing to do is to connect the equipment you want to power directly to the outlets on the generator. Connecting a cord from the generator to a point on the permanent wiring system and *backfeeding* power to your home is an unsafe method to supply a building during a power outage.

What Do I Do During A Blackout?

- Turn off or disconnect any appliances, equipment (like air conditioners) or electronics you were using when the power went out. When power comes back on, it may come back with momentary “surges” or “spikes” that can damage equipment such as computers and motors in appliances like the air conditioner, refrigerator, washer, or furnace.
- Leave one light turned on so you’ll know when your power returns.
- Leave the doors of your refrigerator and freezer closed to keep your food as fresh as possible. If you must eat food that was refrigerated or frozen, check it carefully for signs of spoilage.
- Use the phone for emergencies only. Listening to a portable radio can provide the latest information. Do not call 9-1-1 for information — only call to report a life-threatening emergency.
- Eliminate unnecessary travel, especially by car. Traffic signals will stop working during an outage, creating traffic congestion.
- Remember that equipment such as automated teller machines (ATMs) and elevators may not work during a power outage.
- If it is hot outside, take steps to remain cool. Move to the lowest level of your home, as cool air falls. Wear lightweight, light-colored clothing. Drink plenty of water, even if you do not feel thirsty. If the heat is intense and the power may be off for a long time, consider going to a movie theater, shopping mall, or “cooling shelter” that may be opened in your community. Listen to local radio or television for more information.
- Remember to provide plenty of fresh, cool water for your pets.
- If it is cold outside, put on layers of warm clothing. Never burn charcoal for heating or cooking indoors. Never use your oven as a source of heat. If the power may be out for a prolonged period, plan to go to another location (relative, friend, or public facility) that has heat to keep warm.

Energy Conservation Recommendations

To conserve power to help avoid a blackout, the power industry recommends:

- In heating season, set the furnace thermostat at 68 degrees or lower. In cooling season, set the thermostat at 78 degrees or higher. Consider installing a programmable thermostat that you can set to have the furnace or air conditioning run only when you are at home. Most power is used by heating and cooling, so adjusting the temperatures on your thermostat is the biggest energy conservation measure you can take.

- Turn off lights and computers when not in use. This is especially true about computer monitors – avoid using a “screen saver” and just simply turn the monitor off when you won’t be using the computer for a while. Turn the computer off completely each evening. It is no longer true that computer equipment is damaged from turning it off and on.
- Close windows when the heating or cooling system is on.
- Caulk windows and doors to keep air from leaking, and replace old windows with new, energy-efficient windows.
- Clean or replace furnace and air-conditioner filters regularly.
- When buying new appliances be sure to purchase energy-efficient models.
- Wrap the water heater with an insulation jacket, available at most building supplies retailers.
- If you have to wash clothes, wash only full loads and clean the dryer’s lint trap after each use.
- When using a dishwasher, wash full loads and use the “light” cycle. If possible, use the “rinse only” cycle and turn off the “high temperature” rinse option. When the regular wash cycle is done, just open the dishwasher door to allow the dishes to air dry.
- Replace incandescent light bulbs with energy-efficient compact fluorescent lights.
- Use one large light bulb rather than several smaller ones.

For More Information

If you would like more information about rolling blackouts and how to deal with them, contact the power company that serves your area.