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LED lights for a green Christmas
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Question: I'm decorating my house for the holidays, but I'm concerned about my electric bill. What can I do?

Answer: With energy prices at record highs, many people may think twice before decking their halls with electricity-draining Christmas lights. Energy-conscious consumers can choose from a growing array of LED lights that use less than one-tenth the energy of traditional incandescent bulbs. However, LED lights tend to cost more up front, and shoppers should evaluate what they could save later on their energy bill.

LED stands for "light-emitting diodes." It's a technology that has been around for a while, but until recently there were few products that used LEDs in Christmas lights at a price that compared with traditional strands. But that's changed. Now major retailers carry LED Christmas lights in a variety of styles and colors and fake Christmas trees lit with LEDs.

"The thing about Christmas lights is that LED lights have finally come of age," said Lawrence Comras, CEO and president of GreenHome.com, a retailer of environmentally friendly products. "They make them in an amazing array of colors, styles and sizes ... They finally got the price down, so they are now very affordable."

Still, LEDs can be more expensive than conventional lights. For example, Christmaslightsetc.com sells a strand of 100 conventional lights for \$9.50 and a smaller strand of 70 LEDs for \$19.25.

Artificial Christmas trees also come outfitted with LEDs, but buyers may pay a premium there, too. Walmart.com sells a 7-foot Christmas tree strung with conventional bulbs for \$79.88 online and advertises the same size tree lit with LEDs for \$92.84.

But there are distinct advantages to LEDs, according to a report by the Iowa Energy Center, an energy efficiency group.

LEDs can be used indoors and outdoors, same as traditional lights, but they use just a fraction of the energy that conventional bulbs consume. And LEDs use plastic lenses, instead of glass and filaments, and are virtually unbreakable.

This means they also could prevent one of the season's inevitable headaches: the search for that one faulty light that blows out the whole strand. Unlike incandescents, if a single LED goes out, it doesn't affect the others.

But LEDs are much less likely to burn out: They can last about 200,000 hours while conventional bulbs last 1,000 to 2,000 hours.

These advantages can come at an added cost, however.

ConsumerReports.org compared strands of LED and conventional Christmas lights and declared the price difference a tossup, depending on the length of the strands. The study concluded you might not realize any savings if payback takes more than three 90-day seasons, the industry's standard for how long a household may use the lights.

Consumer Reports' testers concluded that generally LEDs "can be a bit more expensive than incandescents," but favored them overall. LEDs won two of the other three criteria involved in the review, energy use and durability; incandescents won on brightness.

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