

Alvin's money savers

Check out money expert **Alvin Hall** – he's going to save you pounds every week

SAVE £££s ON ENERGY BILLS

The Indian summer is just a memory and the chill wind of autumn is making its presence felt. That means winter coats, scarves and turning the heating on. And that means higher energy bills.

Some energy companies have reduced one or two of their tariffs to generate headlines in the newspapers and make sure they're at the top of the tables on price comparison sites. But it doesn't mean that particular supplier will necessarily be the cheapest overall. If you don't qualify for the headline-grabbing deal (perhaps because you don't want to pay by direct debit), other tariffs offered by the company may not be very competitive. So how can you save on your energy bill?

Shop around for a better deal, but be careful. Read your meter, unless you know how much energy you've used over the last year you won't be able to work out if another gas or electricity company will be cheaper than your current one. Ideally, you should compare the results you get from several different price comparison sites, such as uSwitch.com, confused.com, and switchwithwhich.co.uk, because they may come up with different results. It will take a bit of time (expect to spend around 5 minutes on each site), but it's worth it. There's no point trying to save time if you switch to a more expensive deal.

You'll normally save the most if you switch to a dual fuel online tariff which you pay by monthly direct debit. As a condition of signing up to an online tariff, you may have to read your meter every three months. Many online tariffs insist you pay by monthly direct debit, but not all do. However, you should keep an

eye on the amount of money you're being asked to pay by the energy company every month. Last year a number of energy suppliers were criticised for forcing customers to pay higher monthly direct debits, even when their account was in credit.

Never switch to a different deal through a doorstep salesman, who will only be able to tell you about the deals offered by the company that employs them. They get paid mainly by commission, so they have to get customers to sign up, even if it's not in their best interests to do so. There's been a lot of criticism of the hard-sell tactics that some of them use. Don't fall for them.

Paying by prepayment meter used to be the most expensive way of getting your gas and electricity, but research from the consumer organisation Consumer Focus shows that it's customers who pay by cash or cheque who generate the biggest profit for energy companies. If you're happy to pay by prepayment meter and you owe less than £100, you may be able to save money if you switch to a different energy provider. There's information on how to do this at Consumer Direct, visit consumerdirect.gov.uk.

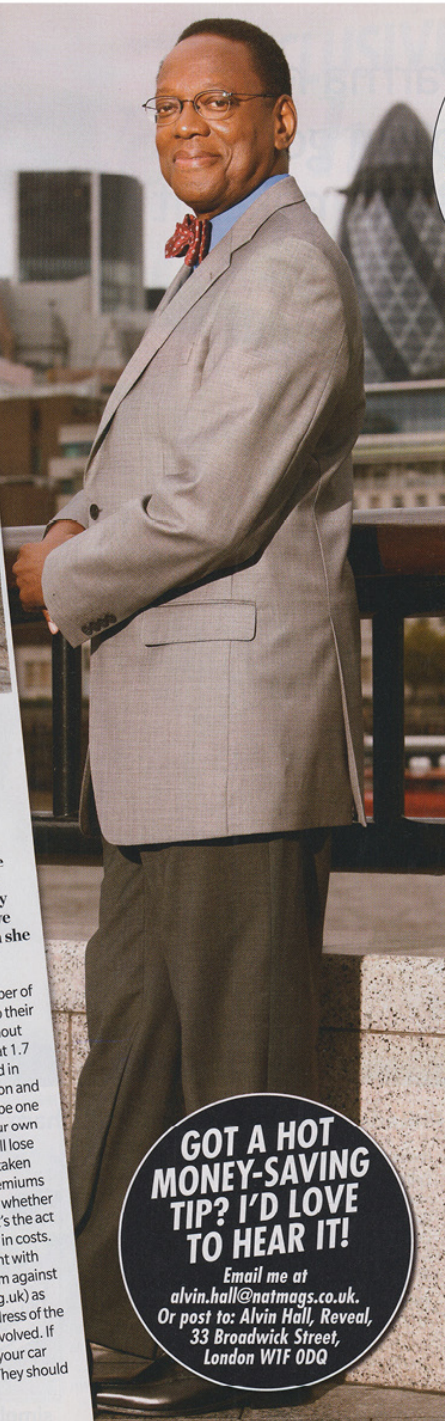


Chloe Crawford and Blake Lively discover a cheaper alternative to keep warm

Q&A

One of my mates had an accident in her car that wasn't her fault, but the other driver didn't have insurance. She's had to claim on her own policy and she's worried she's going to have to pay more. Why should she when she didn't do anything wrong?

Karen, Solihull
ALVIN SAYS: There's an increasing number of drivers who think nothing of getting into their cars without insurance (sometimes without tax or an MOT, either). It's estimated that 1.7 million drivers don't have insurance and in some cities (such as Manchester, London and Liverpool) the number is estimated to be one in every ten drivers. If you claim on your own comprehensive insurance policy, you'll lose your no-claims bonus (unless you've taken out a policy to protect it) and your premiums could go up as well. It doesn't matter whether the accident was your fault or not – it's the act of making a claim that triggers a rise in costs. Anyone who's involved in an accident with an uninsured driver can make a claim against the Motor Insurer's Bureau (mib.org.uk) as long as you have the name and address of the driver and registration of the car involved. If you have legal expenses cover on your car insurance, ring the MIB helpline. They should be able to give you advice.



Team Reveal

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Each week in Reveal I'll be sharing my advice with you

The cooling temperatures remind us that two things will soon be grabbing at our bank accounts and wallets: energy bills and Christmas.

Every year the cost of both gets higher, but our earnings never seem to keep pace. The result is even more pressure on the limited money we have.

This week I suggest some ways to lower the cost of both and tell you what happens to the cost of your car insurance if you have an accident with an uninsured driver.

Being informed and aware are great tools to help you get the most for your money during every season of the year.

Alvin

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Get ready for Christmas!



There's just seven weeks 'til Christmas – so plan your spending now!

1 Make a list of all the gifts you will need to purchase. On the list put the specific item you plan to buy each person and the maximum amount you intend to spend for each item.

2 Take the list with you when you go out shopping (not buying). Use it to check if the money you plan to spend is realistic – given the prices of the items you find. If not, adjust your budget or change what you plan to buy.

3 Ask the salesperson if there will be any pre-Christmas sales or reductions and when they're likely to begin. If you're vigilant and lucky you may get the item you want below your budgeted price.

4 Notice how much of the item is on the racks or store shelves. Then cruise through the store occasionally to see if the stock is changing significantly. If there's still a substantial amount of the item, then it's quite likely there'll be a huge reduction at some point before Christmas. Be patient and vigilant and you may score a real bargain.

5 Always try to spend 10-15 per cent below the total cost of all the gifts on your list. This gives you what I call the 'last-minute gift' cushion to cover you just in case you forget someone. The cushion will keep your budget from going into the red.