

[Emergency Heat](#)

November 5, 2014 by [Chris Ray](#) [10 Comments](#)

This is a topic I haven't covered in a while, and I've gotten some questions related to it recently, so I thought it would be a good time to revisit emergency heat. Going without heat is something that hundreds, if not thousands of people face every year. Many of those affected have electric heat and above ground power lines, which can be brought down by storm damage from falling trees or from ice storms and blizzards.

Energy is one of the [Five Basic Human Needs](#), and the rule of three's tells us that we can only live 3 hours in poor weather without it. Depending on how low the temperature is, that number could be less. Be aware that hypothermia can set in at temperatures less than 50 degrees, so this isn't just a topic for northern states!

Back Up Electricity

One might think the solution to being without heat due to a power outage would be to provide backup electricity with a generator and that might be the case for short term outages. The catch is making sure you have enough fuel to run the generator. I heard stories after Hurricane Sandy about whole home generators that used an entire 500lb propane tank. If the outage is large enough and long enough, nearby gas stations will, most likely, be without power to operate the pumps.

A small generator would sufficiently run space heaters, but the fuel usage is still prohibitive. I own a generator, but my plan for it is to run the freezer and fridge for an hour in the morning and evening to keep the food inside cold.

I'm not going to go more in depth on generators, but if you're interested, here is an article I wrote called [Portable Generators](#) and an article on [storing gasoline and diesel long term](#).

Scope of the Problem

Before we can really come up with a solution, we need to know the scope of the potential problem. Because of the type of events that are most likely to cause us to need emergency heat, it is safe to say there will be a large portion of the people in our area affected.

A side note; we had a large storm here in Minnesota last year, leaving thousands without power in the summer. It was unbelievable the number of people on the news and social media accusing the power companies of not doing anything. The electric grid is a very complex, interconnected and in many instances outdated beast. In a large scale power outage, it is far more complicated to correct say a fallen tree, than just removing the fallen tree and flipping a switch.

Yes, the tree needs to be removed and lines repaired, but there is also a very good chance that the tree falling caused damage to other components down the line. The line must remain off for utility workers to repair all of it and replace said components.

I digress; in a large scale power outage, it is safe to say that it could take a number of days but will probably not take weeks for power to be restored. Hurricane Sandy saw many people without power for several weeks and some saw months. However, that was an aberration caused by wind damage, water damage, flooding of the underground grid and several other factors. I know of several large scale storms across the country where utility companies have brought in crews from other states to get power back to their customers.

What this means is that we need to be prepared to provide emergency heat for our families for up to a week. If the damage is so significant that it will require you to be without power for longer than one week, you might be best served finding another location to reside in until power is restored.

My Emergency Heat Plan

For me personally, a whole home generator with 500lb+ of fuel stored isn't feasible. If we lose heat in cooler temperatures, my plan is to have everyone cohabitate in one room. It is far easier to heat and maintain warmth in one room versus the entire house. I own [Mr. Heater F232000 Indoor-Safe Heater](#), and have multiple 20lb propane tanks. To use 20lb or larger tanks, you also need to purchase a propane hose assembly.

Caution does need to be taken to make sure fresh air is allowed to circulate while using the heaters, but modern day indoor rated heaters are a safe and viable option.

I plan on placing blankets over windows to add a layer of insulation to cause heat loss through them to be minimal. Since water lines freezing is a real danger, water would be shut off going to most of the house, and a small trickle of water would be maintained to the rest of the rooms where running water was needed.

If you're looking for an emergency heat/off grid heat option that is a bit bigger and could heat the entire house, there are several options. It is out of the scope of this article, but you could research wood stoves, pellet/corn stoves and [Rocket Mass Heaters from Permies.com](#) for just three examples.