BILL'S HOME TECH

Home & Small Business Tech Solutions

An Extended Guide · No. 1273

Running Your Home's Essentials in an Outage

Priorities first, then take turns

Tech Made Simple — Service Made Personal

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! Before you begin — a quick safety note.
This guide covers work involving household electricity and engine exhaust, which can cause serious injury, fire, or property damage if something goes wrong. It's here for general information only, not professional advice. If you're not completely comfortable — or if your local codes require a licensed pro — please stop and hire a qualified electrician. Turn off the power at the breaker before any electrical step. Never work on gas lines yourself; if you smell gas, leave right away and call your gas company or 911. There's no shame in calling a pro — that's often the smart, safe choice. You follow this guide at your own risk. — Bill

A Note From Bill

A generator doesn't need to run your whole house exactly like normal — it needs to keep the things that matter going, comfortably, until the power comes back. That's a much smaller job than it sounds.

This guide is about building that short list and learning the easy habit of taking turns with the bigger stuff. Read a page, set it down, come back later — no rush.

What you'll get out of this guide

- How to pick your true essentials, starting with medical devices
- Why the fridge and freezer earn an early spot on the list
- The simple habit of “taking turns” with big loads
- What not to run at the same time
- Notes for town homes and for homes leaning on a well pump

★ Your list, not mine
Every household's essentials look a little different. This guide gives you the framework; you fill in what matters to your family. I'm glad to help — (330) 200-8042.

The Whole Idea in One Page

If you read only one page today, make it this one.

- ❑ Medical devices — CPAP, oxygen, anything a doctor relies on — come first, every time, no exceptions.
- ❑ Next comes the fridge and freezer, so food doesn't spoil, and heat in cold months, so people and pipes stay safe.
- ❑ Add phones, internet, and a few lights so you can stay connected and see what you're doing.
- ❑ Don't run everything at once. Take turns: pause one big item before starting another.
- ❑ Not sure your generator can handle your whole list together? There's a whole guide on sizing it right.

> **✔ Write your list down now**
> Do it while it's calm and quiet, not during a storm. A short list on the fridge door is worth more than a mental one.

Start With a Short List

The households who handle outages calmly aren't running more — they've just gotten clear about what truly matters, ahead of time.

A simple way to sort it

- **Must-have, no question:** medical devices, anything safety-related.
- **Very important:** fridge/freezer, heat in cold months, water if you're on a well or have a sump pump.
- **Nice to have, rotate in:** phone chargers, TV, coffee maker, computer.

This short list does double duty — it's what you power first in an outage, and it's also exactly what feeds a sizing worksheet if you're shopping for a generator.

> **✔ Keep it honest and short**
> A ten-item list you'll actually follow beats a thirty-item wish list you won't.

Medical Devices Come First — No Exceptions

If anyone in your home depends on powered medical equipment, everything else in this guide is secondary to keeping it running.

- Know your device's power needs straight from its own label.
- Ask your medical equipment supplier about backup power recommendations specific to your device — they've likely fielded this question before.
- A battery backup for the device itself is worth considering as a second layer, in case the generator ever needs a moment to refuel.
- Before a forecasted storm, make sure the generator is fueled and ready ahead of time, not after the power's already out.

> **! This is not the place to cut corners**
> Plan generously here. If you're at all unsure how to back up a specific medical device, that's a great question to bring to your equipment supplier or to me.

The Fridge & Freezer: Keeping Food Safe

For most households, the fridge and freezer are the next priority right after medical needs — and for good reason.

- Keep the doors closed as much as you can. Every open-and-close lets cold air out.
- A fuller freezer tends to hold its cold longer than a mostly empty one.
- The compressor's starting jolt is often one of the bigger ones on your whole list, right behind a well or sump pump.
- Plan to keep the fridge and freezer running nearly continuously rather than rotating them in and out.

> **✔ One less thing to worry about**
> Once the fridge and freezer are reliably covered, a lot of the stress of an outage goes with it.

Heat, Phones & Staying Connected

After food safety, most households care most about staying warm and staying in touch with the outside world.

- A furnace blower and its controls need electricity even on gas heat — there's a whole guide in this series on exactly that.
- Keeping a phone charged and the router powered means you can call for help and check weather updates.
- A modest space heater can help take the chill off one room, but don't expect it to heat the whole house.

> **✔ Heat and water pair together**
> If a furnace, sump pump, or water heater is part of your winter worry list, there's a dedicated guide in this series just on those three.

Lights & the Small Stuff That Makes a House Feel Normal

Once the essentials are covered, a few small comforts go a long way toward making an outage feel manageable instead of miserable.

- A few lamps in the rooms you're actually using — no need to light the whole house.
- A TV or radio for news and weather updates.
- Small comfort items like a coffee maker, rotated in rather than left running continuously.

> **★ Comfort counts too**
> This isn't just about survival — a warm cup of coffee and a working lamp make a long outage a lot more bearable. There's nothing wrong with planning for that.

The Big Idea: Taking Turns

A generator only has so much to give at once. The trick to getting more out of it isn't a bigger machine — it's a habit.

Instead of running everything simultaneously, you keep your steady essentials going and pause one thing briefly to make room for something bigger — then switch back.

- Big, occasional motors — recharging a pump, a microwave, a hair dryer — go on one at a time.
- Steady essentials — fridge, furnace blower, a light or two — usually stay running continuously.
- It sounds fussy in writing, but it becomes second nature after you've done it once or twice.

> **✔ Think of it like a busy kitchen**
> One cook can make a full meal by working one pot at a time, not by trying to do everything in the same instant. A generator works the same way.

A Simple Rotation Routine

Here's a routine that works for most households, once you've got your priority list in hand.

- Leave your steady essentials running — fridge, furnace blower, a light or two.
- Before switching on something big and separate, pause one non-essential item if you're close to your generator's limit.
- Run the big item for the few minutes you actually need it.
- Switch back to your steady essentials once you're done.

This habit is exactly what lets a modestly sized generator cover far more of a household's needs than its running watts alone would suggest.

> **✔ Pair this with sizing**
> There's a whole guide in this series on sizing a generator with the running-watts-plus-biggest-surge method — this rotation habit is what makes that number go further.

What Not to Run at the Same Time

A few combinations trip up even a well-sized generator, so it's worth knowing them ahead of time.

- Two big motors starting together — say, a well pump and a central air conditioner — can overwhelm a generator that would handle either one just fine alone.
- High-heat appliances — space heaters, hair dryers, toasters — add up fast in running watts, even without a big starting jolt of their own.
- Piling on “just one more thing” without a glance at your running total is the most common way to trip a breaker.

> **! When in doubt, add one thing at a time**
> Plug in or switch on loads one at a time, biggest motor first, rather than all at once. It's gentler on the generator and easier to troubleshoot if something trips.

If You Live in Town or the Suburbs

Town and suburban households tend to land on a shorter, simpler priority list — but a couple of items deserve special attention.

- Outages are often shorter, so a compact list — fridge, furnace blower, sump pump, phones, a few lights — usually covers the whole event.
- A **sump pump** deserves a spot near the top of the list in storm season; a flooded basement is a real and common risk.
- Natural gas, if your home has it, can make heat and cooking largely hands-off during the outage.
- Homes sitting close together make it worth being thoughtful about noise and placement, though that's about the generator itself more than your priority list.

There's a dedicated guide in this series on furnace, sump pump, and water heater backup if those are the systems you're most focused on.

> ✔ **Short list, done well**
> A well-run short list beats an ambitious long one every time. Keep it simple.

If You're Rural or on a Well

Out in the country, one item usually jumps straight to the top of the list, right behind medical devices: the well pump.

- No power means no well pump, which means no water for drinking, cooking, or flushing — that's why it ranks so high.
- Well pumps ask for their own strong, separate starting jolt — there's a whole guide in this series devoted just to backing one up.
- Longer rural outages mean your list has to hold up for days, not hours, so build your rotation habits with that in mind.
- More often riding on one generator — freezer, barn, outbuilding — makes the “take turns” habit even more valuable here than in town.

> **★ Water first, always**
> For rural customers, getting the well pump reliably covered is usually job one. Everything else on the list gets much easier to plan once that's settled.

The One Rule That Matters Most

Everything else in this guide is about getting the most from your generator. This page is about coming home to your family safe.

A running generator gives off **carbon monoxide**, or CO. It's **invisible**, has **no smell**, and can make you pass out or worse before you ever realize anything is wrong.

- Run the generator **outdoors only**, at least **20 feet** from the house, exhaust pointed away from doors and windows.
- **Never** in a garage, basement, shed, or carport — not even with the door open.
- Put **battery-backup CO alarms** on every floor, near the bedrooms, and test them.
- If an alarm sounds, or anyone feels dizzy, headachy, or sick, get everyone **outside into fresh air** right away and call 911.

> **! This matters more than any item on your list**
> No essential on your priority list is worth risking this. There's a whole guide in this series devoted entirely to carbon-monoxide safety.

Fuel Safety While It's Running

Keeping your priority list going safely also means handling fuel carefully while the generator is in use.

- **Never** refuel a hot or running generator — let it cool first, then add gasoline away from any flame or spark.
- Store gasoline in approved cans, cool and ventilated, away from living space.
- Keep propane cylinders **outdoors**, upright, away from heat — never in the house or a hot car.
- If you ever smell gas, don't flip switches or light anything — get away and call your gas company or 911 from a safe distance.

> **★ There's a whole guide on this too**
> Storing fuel safely, and what to do if you ever smell gas, each get their own dedicated guide in this series if you'd like more detail.

Making Your Own Priority List

Now it's your turn to write one down. Keep it simple, keep it honest, and keep it somewhere you'll actually see it.

Tier	What goes here
Always on	Medical devices, fridge/freezer, furnace blower in cold months, well or sump pump if you have one.
Take turns	Microwave, power tools, hair dryer, anything big you only need for a few minutes at a time.
Skip for now	Anything that isn't truly necessary until the power's back — big appliances, extra electronics.

> **✔ Post it where you'll see it**
> Tape your finished list to the fridge or near the breaker panel. A calm, well-lit afternoon is a much better time to write this than a dark, stormy night.

Getting the Power Where You Want It

Once you know what's on your list, you need a safe way to actually deliver power to it.

- **Extension cords** are the simplest method — heavy-duty, outdoor-rated cords run from the generator to a handful of specific items.
- A **transfer switch or interlock**, installed by a licensed electrician, is the way to power built-in circuits like the furnace, a well pump, or whole rooms.

> **! Never backfeed a wall outlet**
> Plugging a generator into a regular wall outlet to “power the house” can **electrocute a lineworker** and is never worth the risk. There's a whole guide in this series on transfer switches and interlocks.

A Quick Word on Sizing

This guide is about what to power and in what order. Figuring out exactly how big a generator you need is its own subject.

The short version: your priority list is exactly what feeds a sizing worksheet — add up the running watts of your essentials, then add the single biggest starting surge on top. There's a whole guide in this series that walks through it step by step, with a simple worksheet you can fill out yourself.

> **✔ List first, then size**
> It's much easier to size a generator once your priority list is written down. Do this guide's worksheet on page 15 first.

Heat and Water Deserve Special Attention

Two of the trickiest items on most priority lists — the furnace and the sump pump — deserve more than a bullet point.

A furnace or boiler needs electricity for its blower and controls even though the heat itself is gas. A sump pump can mean the difference between a dry basement and a flooded one. A water heater has its own quirks too, especially if it's electric. Because these three come up so often, there's a dedicated guide in this series that walks through each one in detail.

> **✔ Worth reading if winter is your worry**
> If heat and water are at the top of your own priority list, that companion guide is worth the extra few minutes.

When the Power Comes Back

Wrapping up an outage safely matters just as much as starting it did.

- Turn off or unplug your generator loads **before** shutting the generator down.
- If you're on a transfer switch or interlock, switch it back to utility power following its own instructions.
- Give the fridge and freezer a look before assuming everything inside is still good — when in doubt, use your best judgment or check with your local health guidance.
- Let the generator cool, then clean it up and get it ready for next time.

> **✔ A short debrief helps next time**
> Jot down what worked and what didn't on your priority list while it's fresh. Next outage goes even smoother.

When to Give Me a Call

You can build and run your own priority list — that's what this guide is for. But some parts are easier and safer to hand off, and I'm always glad to help.

- Working through your household's own priority list together.
- Sizing a generator to match that list, on the fuel you plan to use.
- Setting up a safe way to power the house — cords, or a transfer switch/interlock with a licensed electrician.
- Backing up a well pump or a furnace/sump pump/water heater setup specifically.
- Walking your whole family through the carbon-monoxide and fuel-safety basics.

I come to you, here in Portage County and nearby, and explain everything in plain language at whatever pace suits you.

> **★ Bill's Home Tech**
> Call or text (330) 200-8042. Tech Made Simple, Service Made Personal. Every visit is $99 flat and 30-day come-back-free — if you're not happy, I'll make it right.

Everyday Cheat Sheet

Dog-ear this page or copy it onto a card. It's the quick answer to the things that come up most.

I want to...	Remember this
Decide what to power	Medical devices first, then fridge/freezer and heat, then phones and lights.
Avoid overloading	Take turns: pause one big item before starting another.
Know what not to combine	Two big motors together, or several high-heat appliances at once.
Power the house safely	Cords for a few items, or a transfer switch/interlock for whole circuits.
Stay safe from CO	Outdoors only, 20+ feet away; CO alarms inside; call 911 if one sounds.
Size it right	See the dedicated sizing guide — running watts plus the biggest surge.
Get help	Call Bill: (330) 200-8042.

Words People Use

A few terms you may hear around running a generator day to day, in everyday language.

Q: Essentials
The handful of things a household truly wants kept running in an outage — not everything, just what matters most.

Q: Load rotation
Taking turns running big items instead of all at once, so a smaller generator can cover more.

Q: Running watts
The steady power a device uses while it's on.

Q: Starting (surge) watts
The extra burst a motor needs for a moment when it first turns on.

Q: Transfer switch / Interlock
The safe, electrician-installed way to feed your home's circuits from a generator without any danger of backfeeding the street.

Q: Carbon monoxide (CO)
The invisible, odorless gas in engine exhaust that can kill. The reason a generator must always run far outdoors.

Q: Backfeeding
Plugging a generator into a wall outlet to power the house — dangerous, and never the right way to do it.

Taking Turns With Big Loads

How one generator covers more than its running watts alone

Illustration - a schematic, not to scale. Your setup may differ.

What to Power, and When

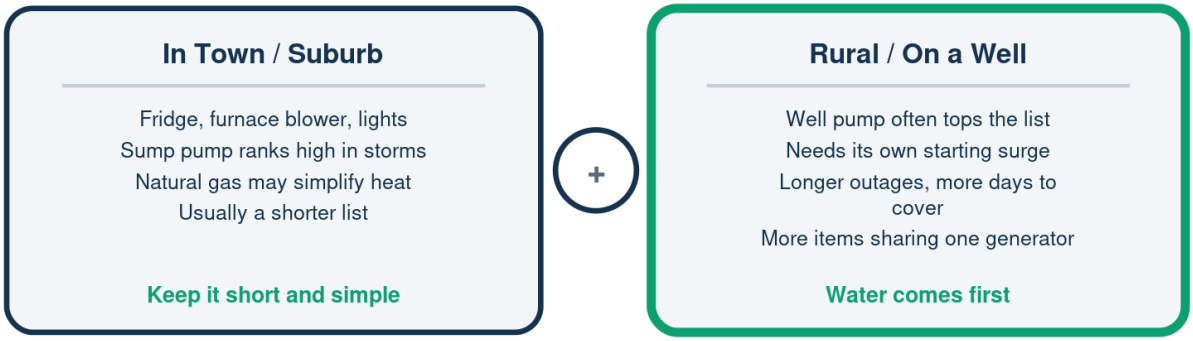
Sort your own list into these three buckets

	Always On	Take Turns	Skip For Now
Examples	Fridge, medical	Microwave, tools	Big appliances
Why	Can't wait	Brief use only	Not urgent now

Illustration - a schematic, not to scale. Your setup may differ.

Town Priorities vs. Country Priorities

Same idea, different item at the top of the list

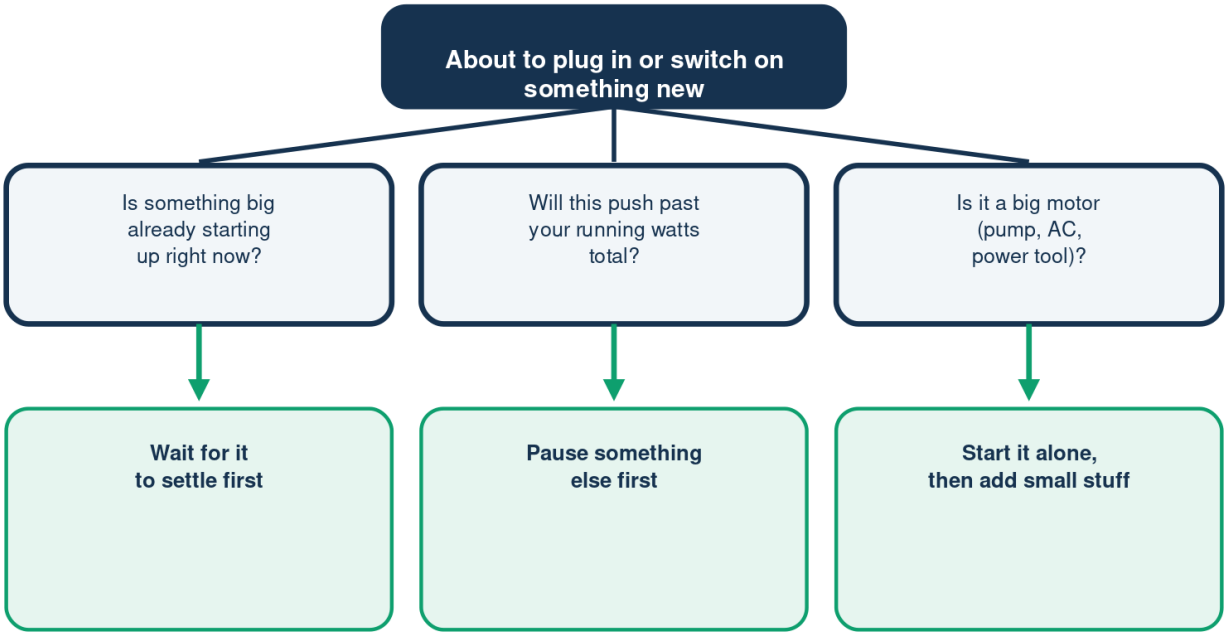


Write your own list — this just shows the shape of it

Illustration - a schematic, not to scale. Your setup may differ.

Can I Turn This On Right Now?

Three quick checks before adding another load



If a breaker trips, that's the generator protecting itself — unplug one thing and reset.

Illustration - a schematic, not to scale. Your setup may differ.

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A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill.

I write these guides to make home tech a little less frustrating, and I do my best to keep every step accurate and up to date. Still, every home, device, and setup is a bit different, so I can't promise a guide will match yours exactly or fix your particular problem. These guides are for general information only — they're not professional, legal, or financial advice, and they don't replace your device's own manual or the manufacturer's instructions. Please go slow, use your own good judgment, and use everything here at your own risk. If a step involves electrical wiring, a gas appliance, a water heater, plumbing, or climbing a ladder — or if anything just doesn't feel safe — please stop and call a licensed professional (or give me a call at 330-200-8042). Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that comes from using these guides. Thanks for reading, and stay safe out there.

— Bill

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