

Emergency Power Cuts Frequently Asked Questions

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Q&A

What's happening

Why would emergency power cuts happen?

Russia's invasion of Ukraine means that overall, this is likely to be a challenging winter for energy supply throughout Europe.

If there isn't enough electricity to power every home and business in Britain at the same time, the Electricity System Operator (otherwise known as National Grid ESO) – which is responsible for ensuring there is enough power to meet demand – could instruct the companies which operate the local power network to reduce electricity demand through emergency power cuts.

Before this happens, there are a number of tools National Grid ESO can use. These include increasing the amount of power being generated, asking large industrial customers to reduce the amount of power they're consuming and paying customers – through their energy supplier – to use less energy at certain times.

Emergency power cuts are only implemented to protect the electricity network from more damage, which would be more disruptive to customers for a much longer period. They are a last resort and wouldn't affect everyone at the same time.

What is an emergency power cut?

Emergency power cuts mean switching power off to at least 5% of UK households at once. They can take place without warning, if National Grid ESO instructs local networks to reduce power demand in the local area to protect the electricity grid and avert longer term issues.

However, where possible, National Grid ESO plans to implement a national timetable of power cuts to fairly share power across the country.

The electricity system in Great Britain is sectioned into blocks that can be temporarily switched on and off, typically for three-hour periods, until the shortage is resolved, and the network can safely go back to normal.

Each electricity meter is assigned a 'block letter'. In the event of an emergency power cut, where there is time to implement an emergency rota, different block letters will be timetabled to be without power for around three hours once or twice a day.

How likely to happen are emergency power cuts?

Emergency power cuts are unlikely this winter. It's important to know that before any emergency planned power cuts occur, National Grid ESO undertakes a 'winter outlook' every year which helps to inform the electricity industry and prepare for the winter ahead. There are a number of additional factors to consider this year, but it is normal for a winter outlook to be published.

As part of this process, National Grid ESO takes several steps to protect customers. These include:

- Asking companies to generate more power to meet the demand and switching on generators which aren't currently supplying power to the market.
- Asking heavy industrial users to limit how much power they use during certain hours.
- Reducing household power usage – this includes paying customers to change how and when they use appliances like washing machines and dishwashers or reducing voltage across the country by a small percentage, which would be undetectable.

Would everyone in the UK have a power cut at the same time?

No, emergency power cuts do not mean the whole country is without power at once. This is a situation that emergency disconnections are designed to help prevent.

Will my neighbours be without power at the same time as me?

In the vast majority of cases this will be true, but the electricity network is designed in such a way that properties in the same street are often supplied by different electricity cables. In some cases, this means that the electricity cable that supplies your property may be switched off, but the cable that supplies your neighbour's property is not.

Block letters and rota

What is a block letter and why is it important?

Each electricity meter is assigned an alphabetical 'block letter'. In the event of an emergency power cut, different block letters are timetabled to be without power for typically around three hours one a day. However, depending on the severity of the scenario, power may be interrupted multiple times over the period of the event.

Where can I find my block letter? What if I can't find it?

You can find your block letter by entering your postcode at powercut105.com. It should also be printed in the top half of your electricity bill. If you can't find it, you should contact your local network operator by calling 105.

How can I find my personal power cut timetable (rota)?

Before an emergency power cut starts, a timetable will be available at powercut105.com.

The timetable will tell you when you will definitely be without power, and when there is a risk, you may be without power. Your power might be switched off or reconnected around 30 minutes before or after the published time depending on national electricity use at that time.

This is because of the need to phase disconnections and reconnections, creating a short overlap.

If your power is not restored within an hour, please check your local network operators website for more information and report your power cut.

Could I still be affected by emergency power cuts, even if my rota block is not affected?

Even if your rota block is not confirmed for disconnection you should be aware that, in isolated instances, due to the large scale of emergency power cuts, there is a possibility that you may experience some short duration (< 3 min) effects. For example, dimming of lights or low power. Please only contact your network operator if you continue to experience these issues more than an hour after the emergency power cut.

Preparing

Will I get advance notice when there's an emergency power cut?

Where possible, National Grid ESO plans to implement a national timetable of power cuts to fairly share power across the country.

It won't be possible to call, text or email every customer in advance.

If a rota is implemented, the Electricity System Operator and UK Government plans to hold a press conference and use social media to let people know a few days before emergency power cuts are needed. You should tune into national and local news and you will learn more about it through official social media channels.

Can you not just give me a generator?

Using a generator isn't always the simplest solution. In an emergency power cut, because more than one million homes – at least 5% of households in Great Britain – will be without power at once, it won't be possible to connect generators.

Should I buy my own generator?

This is a personal decision and not something we can advise on. If you do choose to connect your own generation, this must be done by a qualified professional.

During a power cut

What do I do when the power goes out?

- **Prepare.** Leave one light switched on, so you know when power returns. Turn off all other appliances.
- **Care.** Check in with people who might need extra help
- **Share.** Share this information so friends and family can make a plan too

You can:

- Switch off all appliances, but leave one light switch on so you know when power returns.
- Bookmark powercut105.com on your mobile phone.
- Add emergency numbers to your contacts 105, the number to call to be connected to your local network company.
- Keep a torch handy in case you are without power during the night.
- Have warm clothes and blankets accessible in case you experience a prolonged power cut.
- Check in on your neighbours, friends and family to make sure they're okay.

Please note that mobile phone service will be extremely limited and might drop out entirely.

You can find more information at powercut105.com and by visiting energynetworks.org/be-winter-ready. Further information about being prepared is also available at northernpowergrid.com/be-prepared.

Will food in my fridge/freezer be ok?

You may be concerned at this time about the food in your fridge and freezer. Food should keep for between 4-6 hours in the fridge and 15-24 hours in the freezer if you can avoid opening it.

What about my tropical fish?

When you have invested a lot of time and money in fish and equipment we want to help you look after them during a power cut. Here are some tips:

- During a power cut the temperature of the water in your tank will drop gradually. This speed depends on the surrounding temperature and the volume of water inside the tank, i.e. a larger volume of water will take longer to cool down than a smaller volume of water.
- For insulation, wrap the tank in blankets. If possible, fill hot water bottles with warm water and place them around the outside of the tank.
- Without power, the water will lose oxygen gradually. So fish suppliers recommend a cheap bubble-up filter that can run off a battery-powered air pump. If you don't have one then a normal bicycle pump will do the job.
- Fish suppliers recommend disturbing the water surface for five minutes each hour during a power cut. A good way is to fill a jug with tank water then pour it back in, making as much movement as possible.

Protected sites

Are any sites protected from the power cuts?

A very limited number of sites are protected from emergency power cuts. These are typically locations which are deemed to be critical national infrastructure, such as air traffic control centres and major hospital facilities with accident and emergency departments.

Can my home or business become a 'protected site'?

Homes cannot become 'protected sites' as they are not critical national infrastructure.

Organisations which are not already aware of their protected status will need to apply to become 'protected' as this is not automatic. There is very strict qualifying criteria set out by the Government, and more information on this is provided via the Electricity Supply Emergency Code procedures.

To apply, you should speak to your local network operator. Details can be found at powercut105.com, by entering the postcode of your site.

What about hospitals?

Most hospitals have backup generators to ensure they can continue to operate in the event of power disruption.

What about hospices, care homes, schools and other core services?

Business continuity plans will vary across specific organisations and service providers. Power cuts can occur at any time so most will have plans in place. Whilst National Grid ESO's base case scenario does not expect any planned power disruption, it's sensible to review any additional risks from three hours without electricity, as a precaution.

Businesses which are responsible for caring for vulnerable customers are always encouraged to ensure they have robust business continuity plans in place, this may include investing in their own emergency back-up generator supply.

Priority Services Register

I'm on the Priority Services Register. How much notice will I get?

Power cuts can occur at any time, without notice.

In the event of an emergency power cut, it won't be possible for us to give you advanced notice in the way we normally would for a planned outage. This is because Distribution Network Operators may receive as little as 30 minutes' notice of an instruction for them to implement a power cut.

Distribution Network Operators are contacting customers on the Priority Services Register now, to ensure they have up-to-date information and to remind them about being prepared for the winter.

Whenever possible, your local network operator will begin contacting customers in advance of a rota coming into operation.

What about people that rely on electrical medical equipment?

In most cases, customers who are medically dependent on electricity will be familiar with the process and limitations of their equipment as power cuts can occur from time-to-time during a typical year, including during severe weather, for regular maintenance or due to damage and other routine faults.

These customers often have backup power sources to keep vital equipment powered for several hours during a power failure.

Customers who require a continuous supply of electricity for medical reasons and would need medical support during a power cut, should seek advice from their local health service provider.

Backup power supplies and associated equipment should be regularly checked and maintained by a competent person. If you're concerned, you should speak to your medical equipment or health care provider now.

If emergency power cuts are needed customers will be able to find their rota and what it means for them at powercut105.com by entering their postcode. The rota will only be published once emergency power cuts have been approved to take place.

I have a stairlift – what should I do, and how can I prepare?

Stairlifts often have backup batteries. You should check how long your backup battery is expected to last. If you are unsure, you should speak to your manufacturer.

Emergency power cuts are expected to last around three hours, once or twice per day. A timetable will set out who will be without power and when. You should make sure you have access to a ground floor exit, telephone and heating for the duration of time you are scheduled to be without power.

Why can't you protect me from these power cuts?

Distribution Network Operators are legally required to implement power cuts, when instructed by National Grid ESO. They are not allowed to protect customers from power cuts unless those customers have been classified as a 'protected site' under government and National Grid ESO rules.

Compensation

Can I claim compensation?

No. Under Ofgem rules, compensation is not available for an emergency power cut of this nature.

Will I still be charged for electricity?

You will only be charged for the amount of electricity you use.

How the system works

What is a network operator?

You can choose who supplies your energy. This company is known as your energy supplier and they bill you for the energy you use. **Your energy network operator is different.** They manage and maintain the wires, pipes and other infrastructure which delivers electricity and gas to your home, business and community.

How can I find out who my local network operator is?

You can find out by entering your postcode at powercut105.com. Your network operator is the people you should call if there is a power cut as they are responsible for the network of towers, transformers, poles, cables and meters that deliver power to your home. If you are experiencing a power cut go online to your local network operator's website (find out at powercut105.com) to report the problem or call 105, this is free from most landline and mobile numbers and will put you straight through to your Distribution Network Operator.