battery is fully charged it automatically goes into standby mode. A UPS needs about eight hours to charge fully, depending on what type of battery you have.

This system works best for people who want to keep only a few lights and appliances on. If you want to keep power-hungry appliances such as a geyser and oven going, a generator of 8 000 W and more is a better option.

"You get some people who want everything in their house to work," says Alwyn Coetsee, managing director of Turner Morris, which sells construction equipment, including generators and UPS systems. "They usually need the bigger generators."

How long a generator will last before it runs out of fuel differs from one version to the next. "All Turner Morris generators are equipped with a fuel tank that lasts eight hours at 80 percent load. There are other suppliers who equip smaller tanks that ensure three to four hours of power output," Coetsee says.

SAFETY & STORAGE

The 600 W and 1 200 W UPSes are small enough to fit into the corner of a room or a cupboard.

An electrician can hook up the UPS to your main switchboard in such a way that it automatically switches on and off during load-shedding. So if your kids are often home alone, this might be the best option as they don't have to wheel a generator outside, refuel it and switch it on themselves.

Generators are more powerful but can't be run inside your home or garage as they emit exhaust fumes, which can cause carbon-monoxide poisoning.

"You have to wheel your generator outside but then you have to take the weather into account," Coetsee says. One option is to build a cover outside to protect the generator and extension cord from wet weather.

Never refuel a generator while it's running. If the petrol touches the spark plug, the whole thing can go up in flames, Coetsee warns.

Some generators can also be set to start automatically when there's load-shedding. But if you're not home at the time you'll be wasting expensive fuel.

Both a generator and a UPS require a certified electrician to connect them to your main switchboard. The electrician must also give you a certificate of compliance, otherwise your insurance might not pay out if there's a fire or any damage due to your back-up power system, Coetsee says.

CHEAPER OPTIONS

Not everyone can afford a back-up power system – but this doesn't mean you should be left in the dark or settle for a cold dinner. On the right and the next page are great budget-friendly options for powering through those dark hours.

DREAMSTIME.ISTOCK PHOTO

KNOW YOUR POWER NEEDS

The number of people in the household doesn't really matter when it comes to determining what your power needs are, experts say – two people living in a house with heaters, a geyser and an oven running can consume as much as a family of four with lower electricity needs

A better way to gauge what you need is to check what you want powered during load-shedding. Then check the wattage on each – it should be on a label either underneath or on the side of the appliance.

Make a list of the appliances and their wattages so you have a reference when you're at a store that sells generators and UPS systems – a sales assistant should be able to advise you on your best option.

Alternatively you can get a gadget that displays energy use on a screen.

An Efergy Energy Monitor from Ellies that includes software will set you back between R1 200 and R1 295 but you'll be able to keep a close and constant eye on how much electricity is being used in real time.

How does it work? A sensor is clipped onto the cables that supply electricity to your home and this transmits data to the monitoring device. The device indicates exactly how much power is used when you turn on a light, for example, and the daily average can be downloaded onto your computer so you can track your usage over a longer period.

GENERATORS

- A 2 200 W generator can power one TV, a satellite TV decoder, five 5 W LED lights and a desktop computer at the same time if it has enough fuel.
- Similarly, a 5 500 W generator can power one TV, a satellite TV decoder, ten 5 W LED lights, a desktop computer, a microwave and a hairdryer.

UPS SYSTEMS

- A 600 W UPS can power a cellphone charger, four 5 W LED lights, an alarm system, a Blu-ray player, a small LED TV and a satellite TV decoder for about four hours.
- A 1 200 W UPS can power a cellphone charger, five 5 W LED lights, an alarm system, a Blu-ray player, an LED spotlight, a computer, a small LED TV and a satellite TV decoder for about four hours.

NOISE

If you live in a flat or complex, a UPS is the better bet. Unlike a generator, which can be noisy and emits fumes, a UPS is quiet and clean. It emits a low hum – similar to that of a desktop computer – when switched on.

CELLPHONE

A power bank can come in handy when you're left in the dark and your cellphone is running out of battery life. If you have various tablets, cameras, e-readers and MP3 players, look for a power bank that can charge more than one device (for example, the Whizzy Powerbank, which costs R349 at takealot.com, can power several).

Just make sure to charge the power bank when the electricity is on so it can keep your gadgets going when blackouts roll around.

Prices vary from R130 to R400, depending on how many devices the power bank can handle.

No more flat cellphone batteries during a blackout.

(Turn over)