

Five ways to cut heating costs

If you're thinking it's time to do something about your cold house and your high heating bills, here are five win-win suggestions that will help you do both.

1. REPLACE YOUR FURNACE FILTER

A clogged filter makes your furnace work harder to deliver the same amount of heat, which wastes energy by keeping the furnace on for a longer period in order to bring the house up to the requested temperature.

If you have a central heating system (used for heat only), replace the filter once a year, at the start of the heating season. If you have a heat pump or a furnace with central air conditioning, replace it twice a year, at the start of the heating season and at the start of the cooling season. While replacing the filter, always use a shop vacuum to clean up as much dust and debris within the filter cavity as you can reach.

2. INSTALL A PROGRAMMABLE THERMOSTAT

Programmable thermostats work a whole lot better than your memory. They give you the ability to have a lot more control over your heating and cooling systems, and they will add both convenience and energy savings by raising and lowering the heat at preset times so you don't have to remember to do it.

A programmable thermostat will bring the system on and shut it off based not only on temperature, but on time as well. For example, the thermostat can be programmed to turn on the heat to a certain level at 6 a.m. when you get up, and turn it down again at 8 a.m. when you leave for work. It also can be set for different cycles on different days of the week, and can be overridden with the touch of a single button to temporarily raise or lower the heat.

3. INSULATE DUCTWORK

Since the ducts are running through an unheated space, whether in your attic, crawlspace, basement, or garage, duct insulation is a huge part of the system's ability to retain heated air within the ducts until it gets delivered into the house. All of the ducts in unheated spaces should be completely wrapped without any gaps, and the insulation should be of sufficient thickness to provide good insulating value -- typically around R-8, which is approximately 2 1/2 inches of fiberglass.

4. CLEAN WALL AND BASEBOARD HEATERS

As with a central furnace, it's very important that wall heaters and baseboard heaters be cleaned at the start of every heating season. Before cleaning, however, first try to minimize the potential for dust buildup in the heaters. This might be done by rearranging furniture, increasing fresh air in the room, or increasing air flow in front of the heaters.

To clean baseboard heaters, first shut off the circuit breaker that supplies power to the heater. To be certain you have the correct breaker, turn the thermostat up to high for 30 seconds or so and make sure that the heater does not come on. Remove the front cover and use a vacuum to clean out the inside of the heater, being careful not to damage the aluminum fins inside the heater. If you notice that the fins are bent, you can use a fin comb, available through many heating contractors and other retailers of heating equipment, to straighten them out again.

For wall heaters, shut off the circuit breaker for the heater, and verify that it's off as described above. Remove the screws that hold the grill in place, and remove the grill. Wash the grill in hot soapy water, dry it, and set it aside. You can then clean the inside of the heater using a vacuum, taking care not to touch the heating elements, or you can blow out dust using the blower side of your shop vacuum.

Note: Be sure to refer to the instruction book that came with the heater, or check with the manufacturer's Web site for specific cleaning instructions and safety precautions.

5. COVER AND WEATHERSTRIP ROOM AIR CONDITIONERS

If you have a room air conditioner that sits in a window or mounts into an opening in the exterior wall, they have the potential to leak a lot of air. If the air conditioner is in a window and is easy to remove, your best bet is to remove it, clean it, and then store it for next summer.

If it's not easily removed, then examine the unit carefully to see if there is any daylight coming in around it. You can use foam tape, expandable spray foam, or other weatherstripping materials to close up the gaps around the case. Finally, buy or build a cover that will slip over the unit from the outside and prevent cold air from coming through it and into the house.