Home Repair Resource center

HOMEOWNER REPAIR GUIDE

CHECK OUT YOUR HEATING SYSTEM

Each year, as the weather turns colder, it's a good idea to have your heating system checked out by a professional. There are some things, however, that you can do yourself once a year to make sure your furnace or boiler is operating at maximum efficiency (most will be part of a professional inspection):

YOUR YEARLY CHECKLIST

1 CHECK THE FLAME

Check the flame on your furnace or boiler (and your hot water heater, too). The flame should be burning evenly and be blue in color, with very little orange or yellow; an orange flame can indicate that the air/fuel mixture is incorrect, and can result in soot filling up the heat exchanger. (Verifying the firing rate and adjusting the air/fuel mixture should be a routine part of a professional clean and check.)

2 CLEAN THE BLOWER

Turn off the system and let it cool down. Then, use a stiff brush to scrape clean the blade on the blower fan. (You can purchase brushes designed for this purpose at your local heating supply store.) Vacuum the blower and burner compartments to remove any dust or other debris.

3 CHECK BELTS AND OIL THE MOTOR

On older units, "belt drive" blowers are common. If you have one, check all the belts for wear and tension; replace any belt that is cracked or glazed. If the belt on the furnace motor has more than about a half-inch of play, tighten it using the adjusting bolt. If you have an older system without sealed bearings, add some lightweight non-detergent oil to the oil port(s) on the furnace motor and/or blower motor. (Do not oil the belt itself.) Some hot water boilers have a pump that should be oiled periodically.

4 CHECK THE EXHAUST SYSTEM

Open the clean-out door at the bottom of your chimney and remove any ashes that have accumulated there. Hold a mirror inside the cavity and make sure you can see daylight. If your chimney is blocked by a bird's nest or other obstruction, it should be removed. Check the chimney itself, inside and out, to make sure the bricks and the mortar between them are solid and intact.

5 CHECK THE HEAT DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM

On forced-air furnaces, make sure all joints in the ductwork are tight and do not allow hot air to escape. (Loose joints can be corrected with sheet metal screws and sealed with duct mastic.) Insulate any ductwork that travels through unheated areas, like a basement crawl space or behind a knee wall. If a steam radiator is not heating, you may need to replace a vent. Most hot water radiators should be bled of air at the start of each heating season.

MORE FREQUENT MAINTENANCE

Some maintenance needs to be done more frequently. If you have a boiler with a sight glass, check it every couple of days. (If the water supply to the boiler is not adequate, the boiler can over-heat and explode.) For furnaces, change the filter monthly during the heating season.

Don’t forget to check your owner’s manual. It will specify the maintenance needs of your particular system.

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Home Repair Resource Center empowers homeowners to maintain their homes for sustainable and diverse communities.

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