

WARMING UP

Turning on the heat is nothing to sneeze at

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Copley News Service

If winter's cold snaps leave you feeling under the weather, you might blame it on your heater.

As soon as furnaces kick in at the beginning of the winter season, so do allergy and flu-like symptoms, including coughing, sneezing, wheezing, headaches, nausea and itchy eyes and throats.

And doctors say it's no coincidence. The first time you turn up the thermostat, they say, is the worst. That's when the heating system blows out everything that has collected in the pipes, including dust, mold and debris such as animal dander, pesticides and decomposed bugs and their waste.

It might help a little to open the windows and leave the house for a few hours while the system blows out the worst of the debris, said Dr. Charles Moss, an environmental specialist. But he warned that it won't help much.

The problem is that just as the dust begins to settle again, the system sucks it back in and the process starts over, especially if the filter is dirty and, therefore, less efficient.

The dustier the house, the more dust the system can pick up and return, said Dr. James Seltzer, an allergist and head of Indoor Hygienic Technologies Corp., a company that evaluates household toxins and prescribes measures to deal with them.

Filters, especially inexpensive fiberglass models, need to be changed regularly.

"Change the filter as soon as it starts to look dirty," Seltzer suggested.

Sometimes, he said, this means a new one as often as monthly during the cold season.

Homeowners who suffer from environmental allergies may consider replacing the standard throwaway filter with a more efficient type.

At about \$6, one of the least-expensive choices is the extended-surface pleated filter. Also disposable, this type lasts longer and is more efficient than the standard filter, according to Jack Allergretti of Echo Air Products in San Diego.

On the downside, he said, a pleated filter slightly decreases airflow through the heating system, wasting some energy.

Other substitutes for the standard models are electrostatic and electronic filters. Electrostatic filters, which cost between \$40 and \$90, are reusable but not much more efficient than the standard type, Allergretti pointed out. He said they work best in a dry environment and must be kept clean for maximum efficiency.

Electronic filters, which cost between \$800 and \$1,500, and are installed adjacent to a heating unit, are considerably more efficient, he said. Again, this type of filter is most efficient when clean.

A portable, high-efficiency, particulate-arresting filter, which costs between \$80 and \$300, is nearly 100 percent efficient in filtering impurities, according to Allergretti. Separate from the heating system, the HEPA filter only cleans the air in the

room in which it sits.

For maximum efficiency, the entire heating system needs to be kept clean. The vent covers, including the one on the return vent, should be cleaned at the beginning of the season, Seltzer said. Unscrew the covers and vacuum both the front and back.

Also recommended is a vacuum cleaner, brush or damp cloth to clear dust and lint from around the pilot light and burner areas of the furnace.

Some homeowners hire a duct-cleaning specialist. Moss recommends getting the system cleaned by a professional every few years. Allergy sufferers might consider an annual cleaning, he said.

But turning on the heat can do more than trigger allergy and cold symptoms — it can kill you.

Nationwide, at least 250 people annually are fatally poisoned by carbon monoxide from faulty heaters, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission. More than 5,000 suffer injuries, some of them permanent.

The best defense against both carbon monoxide poisoning and dust-related illness is an annual inspection by a heating contractor or a technician from the local power company. The utility offers free inspections and recommends that homeowners telephone before relighting their pilot lights. However, expect about a 10-day wait for a service call.

It also might help to install electronic carbon monoxide detectors near the

source of the heat, as well as in bedrooms and living areas. About the size of smoke detectors, battery-operated or electric carbon-monoxide detectors cost between \$35 and \$100.

Although the detectors are not fool-proof and are somewhat controversial — some utilities oppose them, although trade associations such as the Gas Research Institute and the American Gas Association have taken no position — at least some experts believe they're a good idea.

Avoid problems with furnace

Experts offer the following hints for avoiding furnace-related problems:

If you suspect a carbon-monoxide leak, open doors and windows, turn off the heat and leave the house immediately.

Make sure pilot light and burner flames are bright blue — not yellow.

Make sure the furnace vent to the outside is free of obstructions.

Crack open a window in the rooms you're using, as well as the room that contains the furnace.

If your system needs a thorough cleaning, consider hiring an expert.

If your allergies are severe, consider hiring an environmental consulting agency for an evaluation.

Remember, advised allergist Dr. James Seltzer, "when you're sick and you don't have a good explanation for it, look around. It could be your environment."



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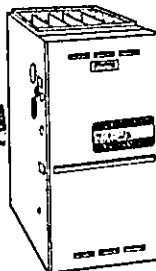
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