

# Play it safe when caring for furnace

Despite my pleas to Ma Nature, despite my grousing, winter is finally here. I even suggested a compromise: Let's do winter for four weeks (I'd originally asked for only one) and I'd promise never to complain about the heat of summer again. Let's try something new, I suggested - send San Diego five months of cold weather. Somehow, though, my appeals were considered trivial, and frigid winter is upon us once again.

My friends in management tell me this isn't a problem, it's an opportunity. Today's column, then, will discuss the "opportunity" of checking out our home heating systems. Because most homes in this area are heated by gas-fired, forced air furnaces, this column will concentrate on them.

When you first activated your thermostat, you may have noticed a strange odor that lasted a brief time. In most cases, this is simply a buildup of environmental dust and grime that has settled over the burners since they were last used. If the odor doesn't persist beyond a few minutes, it is generally no cause for concern.

That first furnace-firing odor should also be our reminder to get busy. Here is a checklist of activities that will help keep the winter cold outside your house (if we can't send it to San Diego) and

make for a safer, more efficient heating system.

**Clear your belongings** - We in the inspection business are constantly surprised by the number of people who don't follow safe-furnace practices. The rule is simple: Keep belongings away from your furnace.

Keep in mind that furnace flues, except on very high efficiency furnaces, get very hot and will start fires. I'm still haunted from reading about the death of a local mother and her children a couple of years ago, from clothes that ignited from being stored too close to the furnace flue. Keep all flammables out of the vicinity of the furnace and never store gas cans anywhere close by.

**Change your filter** - Furnace filters not only keep the dust level down but they serve a function in the maintenance of furnaces and central air conditioning. A dirty filter will increase your utility bill and put added stress on the heating system. Change it now and change it often. (We'll provide more indepth information on filter options in a future column.)

**Close that soap box!** - Airborne soap dust is thought to be corrosive. If your laundry is in the same area as your furnace, use liquid soap or keep your soap powder container closed when not in use.

**Have your furnace inspected** - All furnaces should be inspected, cleaned, lubricated, adjusted, etc. on an annual basis by a qualified heating contractor. Your annual checkup will help discover any safety or operational concerns and can lessen the costs of maintenance and operation over the long run.

By the way, be wary of \$29 "we're-in-the-neighborhood" specials. A furnace contractor can't do a good job and make a living at below market prices and the "special" is sometimes a way to get in the door to convince you to buy a new furnace. Single women and the elderly are often targeted by unscrupulous furnace contractors. A full inspection by a good heating company will generally cost from \$65 to \$95 in metro Detroit.

Obtain a list of items that each contractor under consideration will check. It may seem like overkill to spend this amount of time qualifying contractors for a cleaning and inspection, but remember that the furnace is an expensive piece of equipment that is vital to your comfort and safety.

You will find that the inspection process varies significantly from company to company. Make sure that the inspection includes at least the following: gas valve operation, blower motor, heat exchanger, safety controls, flue and chimney (including back draft test) and

compliance to manufacturer's installation specifications. Some companies will also check for carbon monoxide.

Newer furnaces are substantially more complicated than those of even 10 years ago. We recommend that a factory-trained technician from a factory-authorized dealer be used for maintenance of any high efficiency furnaces. Manufacturer specifications can vary widely among brands; a factory-trained technician is more likely to provide competent service and evaluation of these technically complex furnaces.

Make sure that you are present for the furnace cleaning and inspection and ask the technician to explain their procedures. Most are glad not only to explain their procedures but to give you additional operating advice that might save you a future service call. If a furnace contractor advises you to replace your furnace, seek a second opinion. Ask them to put their findings in writing, on a company work order, and to be specific.

At this point, you may be told that your furnace must be replaced immediately and that you are at immediate risk. Maybe so, oftentimes not. Repeat your request to put their findings in writing, on a company work order. (If they

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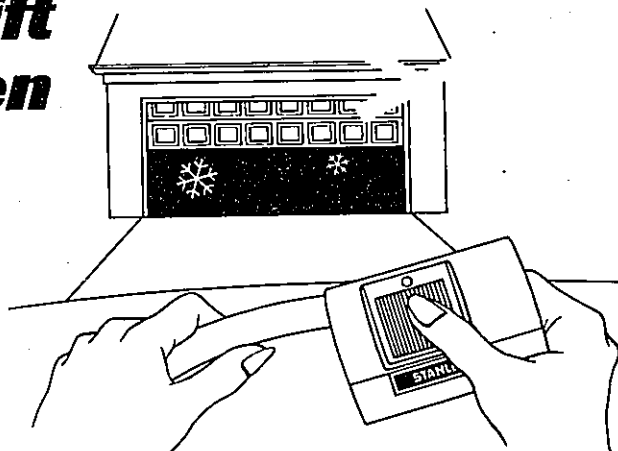
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