

Here are top furnace problems

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In an earlier column, we discussed the importance of furnace start-up procedures and the value of an annual cleaning and inspection. Today we will examine some of the most common problems discovered during inspections of heating equipment.

Some of these items are created unknowingly by homeowners, some are the result of lack of maintenance and still others come through the normal wear and tear process. Today we will discuss our top 10 list of the most frequent heating problems.

1. **Missing or dirty filters** - A high number of homeowners rarely change or clean their furnace 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. On some inspections, we will see dirt so thick that barely any air can pass through the furnace.

2. **Humidifiers off or inoperable** - Many homeowners turn off their humidifier in the summer and never activate it again. Most homes can use the extra humidity in the wintertime and oftentimes the thermostat can be dialed back a couple of degrees if proper humidity levels are maintained.

The older drum-style humidifiers seem to be most prone to breakdown, especially in areas that don't benefit from Detroit's municipal soft water. Humidifiers need to be cleaned at the start of the heating system and pads changed as soon as they begin to deteriorate or become overlaid with minerals. The newer power humidifiers provide better humidification with less hassle. If yours needs repair or replacement, consider upgrading your unit.

3. **Poor combustion color** is a sign of improper functioning. On most furnaces, you can see the flame without removing any covers. If your furnace flame is orange or yellow, have the unit serviced. Often, the fix is as simple as a routine cleaning and adjustment, but more serious problems may exist.

The cleaner any combustion appliance burns, the less likely that carbon monoxide can be a problem. You want the flame on your furnace, water heater and other combustion appliances to be a bright blue.

4. **Flame rollout** is a serious defect that requires immediate professional response.

Flame rollout describes a combustion problem where the flame of the furnace actually leaves the confines of the com-

bustion chamber and shoots out toward the room. This can burn other components of the furnace, including wiring and - when at its most serious - can start a fire in the house.

The condition is a result of a small to large explosion of natural gas, and can be accompanied by a booming sound or a "whoompf" kind of a noise. Sometimes a cleaning and adjustment can correct flame rollout but it can also indicate a more serious defect with the heat exchanger requiring furnace replacement.

5. **Missing covers** are a concern, not only because they protect us from potential hazards in the furnace, but because they can cause misoperation. Furnaces manufactured in the last several years have switches that shut the furnace down when the blower cover has been removed. This has two purposes - one, to keep our hands out; and two, to prevent the furnace from drawing fumes into the blower compartment where they can be distributed throughout the home.

6. **Disabled safety switches** are all too common. The most frequent problems we see are furnace disconnect switches and blower door safety switches taped in the "on" position. Tampering with any part of the furnace can void the warranty and subject the occupants to unnecessary risks.

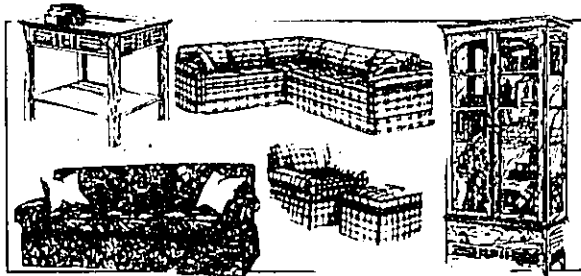
7. **Improper flues (vent systems)** were discussed at length in an earlier column. (If you missed it, contact the author at AmeriSpec in Plymouth for a complimentary copy.) The most important rules here are: a) don't change or alter the furnace flue system yourself; b) have your flue checked annually by your furnace contractor or a qualified chimney sweep; and c) store belongings well away from combustion equipment, including the flues.

8. **No chimney liner** - If you have a masonry furnace chimney and have upgraded to a mid- or high-efficiency furnace, chances are a liner is needed for your chimney.

The liner protects the chimney from damage and improves draft of the furnace and water heater, particularly during the cold winter months. It is needed because the masonry chimney is oversized for modern furnaces that waste much less heat than their predecessors. The chimney cannot properly exhaust flue gases and back drafting can occur. The chimney also becomes more susceptible to freeze thaw damage because flue gases that once were expelled quickly hang around and find their way into the chimney structure.

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