

TIPS ON PREPARING FOR WINTER

Block those leaks

One of the best ways to winterize your home is to simply block obvious leaks around your house, both inside and out. The average American home has leaks that amount to a nine-foot square hole in the wall.

First, find the leaks: On a breezy day, walk around inside your home holding a lit incense stick to help locate your drafty areas. The most common drafty areas are recessed lighting, window and door frames, electrical outlets.

Buy door sweeps to close spaces under exterior doors, and caulk or apply tacky rope caulk to block those drafty spots around window frames. Outlet gaskets can easily be installed in electrical outlets that share a home's outer walls, where cold air often enters.

Outside, seal leaks with weather-resistant caulk. For brick areas, use masonry sealer, which will better stand up to freezing and thawing. Even if it's a small crack, it's worth sealing up, and it also discourages any insects from entering your home.

Insulation

Another thing that does cost a little money, but helps save on heat costs, is adding insulation to the existing insulation in the attic. You need a minimum of 12 inches of insulation in your attic.

A general rule of thumb on whether you need to add insulation--if you go into the attic and you can see the ceiling joists you know you don't have enough, because a ceiling joist is at most 10 or 11 inches.

A related tip: If you're layering insulation atop other insulation, don't use the kind that has "kraft face" finish (a paper backing). It acts as a vapor barrier, and can cause moisture problems in the insulation.

Check the furnace

First, turn your furnace on in early fall, to make sure it's even working, before the coldest weather descends. A strong, odd, short-lasting smell is natural when firing up the furnace in the autumn; simply open windows to dissipate it. But if the smell lasts a long time, shut down the furnace and call a professional.

It's a good idea to have furnaces cleaned and tuned annually. Costs will often run about \$100-\$125.

Throughout the winter you should change the furnace filters regularly (check them monthly). A dirty filter impedes air flow, reduces efficiency and could even cause a fire in an extreme case. Toss out the dirty fiberglass filters; reusable electrostatic or electronic filters can be washed.

Ductwork

Ducts also should be vacuumed once every few years, to clean out the abundant dust, animal hair and other gunk that can gather in them and cause respiratory problems.

Windows

In early fall take down the window screens and put up storm windows, which provide an extra layer of protection and warmth for the home. Storm windows are particularly helpful if you have old, single-pane glass windows. If you don't have storm windows and your windows are leaky or drafty, budget to replace them a few at a time. In the meantime, buy a window insulator kit which is plastic sheeting that's affixed to a window's interior with double-stick tape. A hair dryer is then used to shrink-wrap the sheeting onto the window. (It can be removed in the spring.) It's temporary and it's not pretty, but it's inexpensive (about \$4 a window) and it's extremely effective.

Chimney

A chimney should at least be inspected before use each year.

Woodstoves: Should be swept more than once a year. A general rule of thumb is that a cleaning should be performed for every ¼ inch of creosote, anywhere that it's found. Why?—Because if it's ash, then it's primarily lye, and it's very acidic. It can cause mortar and the metal damper to rot.

Another tip: Buy a protective cap for your chimney, with a screen. It keeps out foreign objects (birds, balls) as well as rain that can mix with the ash and eat away at the fireplace's walls. Buy based on durability, not appearance.

One other reminder: To keep out cold air, fireplace owners should keep their chimney's damper closed when the fireplace isn't in use. And for the same reason, woodstove owners should have glass doors on their stoves, and keep them closed when the stove isn't in use.

Reverse that ceiling fan

Reverse your ceiling fan from the summer operation. The fan will push warm air downward and force it to recirculate, keeping you more comfortable. (Here's how you know the fan is ready for winter: As you look up, the blades should be turning clockwise.)

Wrap those pipes

A burst pipe caused by a winter freeze is a nightmare. Prevent it before Jack Frost sets his grip: Before freezing nights hit, make certain that the water to your hose bibs is shut off inside your house (via a turnoff valve), and that the lines are drained.

Next, go looking for other pipes that aren't insulated, or that pass through unheated spaces -- pipes that run through crawlspaces, basements or garages. Wrap them with pre-molded foam rubber sleeves or fiberglass insulation, available at hardware stores.

Clean those gutters

Once the leaves fall, remove them and other debris from your home's gutters -- by hand, by scraper or spatula, and finally by a good hose rinse -- so that winter's rain and melting snow can drain. Clogged drains can form ice dams, in which water backs up, freezes and causes water to seep into the house.

Check those alarms

This is a great time to check the operation -- and change the batteries -- on your home's smoke detectors. Detectors should be replaced every 10 years, fire officials say. Test them -- older ones in particular -- with a small bit of actual smoke, and not just by pressing the "test" button. Check to see that your fire extinguisher is still where it should be, and still works.

Also, invest in a carbon-monoxide detector; every home should have at least one.