FREE HOMEOWNER CHECKLIST

10 Signs Your Furnace Needs Repair

What to look, listen and smell for this winter, and when to stop and call a technician.

Most furnaces give warning before they fail. A new noise, a smell that hangs around or a room that never quite warms up are all signs worth paying attention to, especially before a cold snap.

Use this list to spot problems early. For each sign, we've noted what usually causes it and what you can safely do yourself. Anything involving gas, wiring or the burners belongs with a licensed technician.

1 The furnace blows cold or lukewarm air

Common causes include the thermostat fan set to ON, a dirty filter tripping the high limit switch, a failed igniter or a dirty flame sensor.

- [ ] Set fan to AUTO
- [ ] Replace the filter
- [ ] Call if it still blows cold after 5 minutes

2 It turns on and off every few minutes

Short cycling usually means a safety switch is shutting the furnace down. Overheating from poor airflow and a dirty flame sensor are the top causes.

- [ ] Check the filter and vents
- [ ] Do not keep resetting it
- [ ] Call for service if it continues

3 New noises: banging, squealing or rattling

A loud bang at startup can mean delayed ignition. Squealing often points to a blower motor or belt. Rattling can be a loose panel or a failing part.

- [ ] Note when the noise happens
- [ ] Call if it is loud or new

4 Smells that don't go away

A burning-dust smell on the first run of the season is normal. A burning plastic or electrical smell is not. A rotten egg smell can mean a gas leak.

- [ ] Gas smell: leave the house and call the gas utility from outside
- [ ] Electrical smell: turn the furnace off and call

5 Yellow or flickering burner flame

A healthy gas flame is mostly blue. A yellow, lazy or flickering flame can mean poor combustion, which may produce carbon monoxide.

- [ ] Look through the sight glass if your furnace has one
- [ ] Call for service if the flame is yellow

6 Carbon monoxide alarm sounds

Treat every CO alarm as real. Headaches, dizziness or nausea that ease outdoors are warning signs too.

- [ ] Get everyone outside
- [ ] Call 911 or your gas utility
- [ ] Have the furnace inspected before using it again

7 Rooms heat unevenly

One cold room can mean closed or blocked vents, a duct problem in the attic or an airflow issue at the blower.

- [ ] Open and clear all vents
- [ ] Note which rooms stay cold

8 Heating bills jump without explanation

When your habits and the weather haven't changed but the bill has, the furnace may be running longer to make the same heat.

- [ ] Compare with last year's bill for the same month
- [ ] Book a tune-up to check performance

9 The furnace won't start at all

Check the easy things first: thermostat set to HEAT, fresh batteries, the furnace power switch on, the breaker not tripped and the furnace door closed tight.

- [ ] Run the quick checks
- [ ] Note any blinking error code
- [ ] Call if it still won't start

10 Water or rust around the furnace

High-efficiency furnaces make water that drains away through a small line. Puddles or rust can mean a clogged or frozen drain, or a problem inside the unit.

- [ ] Check the drain line and pump
- [ ] Call if water keeps coming back

When to call a licensed technician

- You smell gas or a CO alarm sounds. Leave first, then call from outside.
- You see scorch marks, smoke or a yellow flame.
- The breaker trips again after a reset.
- The furnace short cycles or won't stay lit after a new filter.

My notes

Write down anything you want a technician to check, plus your system details.

Furnace or heat pump brand _____

Model number _____

Approximate age _____

Filter size _____

Last tune-up date _____

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