



Highlights: Heating and Air-Conditioning Contractors

Replacing home heating or cooling equipment costs thousands of dollars. So it makes sense to maintain your current system properly, get good repairs when needed, and shop very carefully when you need new equipment. The new issue of **Chicago Consumers' Checkbook**, available at www.checkbook.org, compares 183 local heating and air-conditioning services and gives consumers essential advice about all aspects of maintaining and updating their homes' HVAC systems. Findings from Checkbook's report include:

If you are considering buying new equipment:

- Before installation of a new system or a major system expansion, get proposals from several companies and carefully compare them. How well you design the system will affect how quickly and uniformly the house is heated or cooled, how noisy it will be, what drafts it produces, how much space it will occupy, maintenance requirements, and other important aspects of performance. Cost is key—some companies charge FAR higher prices than others for the same installation job.
- Make sure that the equipment you buy is the proper size for your home. Undersized units won't efficiently heat or cool spaces, but bigger is definitely not always better.
- Be skeptical about claims of cost savings from more energy-efficient equipment. There may be substantial savings, and there are compelling public-interest reasons to install more efficient equipment. But some companies are prone to exaggerating the size of the savings in order to sell new or more expensive equipment.
- When comparing models, it's important to understand that features such as variable-speed blowers and two-stage burners that reduce energy usage won't be reflected on their models' efficiency ratings because ratings are determined while equipment operates at full capacity (a variable-speed blower, for example, usually runs at a constant low speed to maintain the correct temperature, increasing speed and energy use only as needed).
- Investing thousands of extra dollars in ultra-efficient equipment makes no sense if your home is drafty or poorly insulated, or if you prefer tropical thermostat settings in the winter. Before upgrading your equipment, make sure your attic is well-insulated and seal up easy-to-fix leaks.
- For one sample home in the Chicago area (2,700 square feet, two stories, with a fully finished basement), Checkbook considered recent energy prices, available tax incentives, and utility rebates to develop estimates of how energy costs would be affected by the purchase of new equipment with varying energy efficiency ratings (the article explains how consumers can do this for their own homes). Checkbook found:
 - For furnaces, because the resulting energy savings quickly "pay off" the extra cost, it makes sense to pay extra for a more efficient furnace, compared to buying a minimally efficient 80 AFUE model. Including a federal tax credit and a utility rebate, the energy savings you'd get from installing a more efficient 95 AFUE model in Checkbook's sample house would pay off its extra cost in less than three years.
 - For air conditioners, in the Chicago area it usually doesn't make sense to pay more for a highly energy efficient air conditioner rather than a basic unit. And these days, all new units are relatively efficient.
 - The best way to cut home energy costs is the most obvious one: Dial down your thermostat, and get and use a programmable one.

Ways to save money and hassle with HVAC service:

- Choose your contractor very carefully. Checkbook's ratings reveal big differences in the quality of work offered by area companies. Some of the heating and A/C services evaluated were rated "superior" for "overall quality" by 90 percent or more of their surveyed customers, while other companies scored much lower, receiving such favorable ratings from 60 percent or fewer of their surveyed customers.
- Shop around. Prices for the exact same services varied widely among Chicago-area companies. Although most consumers surprisingly don't get competitive bids even for costly jobs, getting multiple bids will often save homeowners hundreds or thousands of dollars. Some examples of price quotes Checkbook gathered for routine jobs:
 - To replace a blower motor and capacitor for a Trane XR90 single-stage gas furnace, prices ranged from \$290 to \$1,100.
 - For the installation of an Aprilaire #600M Whole-House Humidifier, prices ranged from \$375 to \$950.
 - To install a specific Honeywell VisionPRO programmable thermostat, prices ranged from \$237 to \$700.
 - To install a new ignitor in a Carrier Weathermaker 8000 gas furnace, prices ranged from \$115 to \$438.
- Be skeptical about the annual maintenance visits and service contracts some companies push. If you decide to get a contract, choose the company carefully; Checkbook gets many complaints about contractors using regular maintenance visits as opportunities to squeeze customers for unnecessary repairs.
- The most important maintenance task for either a furnace or a cooling system is something you can do yourself—regularly replacing the air filter. If you do that faithfully, getting a maintenance visit from a technician may not be necessary every year.

The media may cite selected examples of top-rated heating and air-conditioning contractors, as shown in Chicago Consumers' Checkbook, and Checkbook's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or jlettis@checkbook.org to schedule.

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