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SPECIAL ISSUE | FEBRUARY 2015

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Central Air Conditioning Systems

Big energy savings over earlier central air systems is a good reason to install a new system or replace one that's lost its cool. Keep the following tips in mind to help you buy the right system.

Underestimate your cooling needs, and you could be sweating. Buy more power than you need, and your living space may become cold and clammy. Any contractor you hire should calculate the size of the cooling equipment you need by using such recognized methods as the Air Conditioning Contractors of America Manual J. More cool tips:

Hire your own installer. Consumer Reports National Research Center shows a strong correlation between repairs and installation. For central A/Cs, 19 percent of systems installed by new-home builders failed compared with 12 percent installed by contractors hired by homeowners. The gap was even

wider for heat-pump units, where 28 percent of the builder-installed units failed compared with 18 percent for owner-installed systems.

Keep it clean. Be sure hedges and plants are at least 2 feet away from the outside unit.

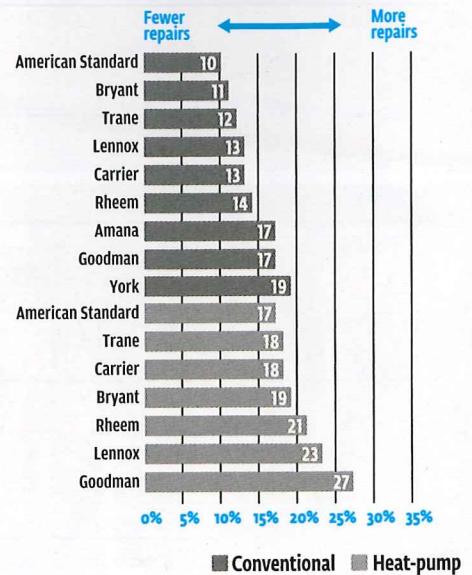
Clean grills and filters monthly. Clear debris and dirt from condenser coils and check for blockages in the drain pipe.

Seal and insulate ducts. Up to 25 to 40 percent of energy can escape through leaks or when ducts aren't insulated.

Buy a reliable brand. Check our findings on the most and least reliable brands, based on surveys of almost 34,000 Consumer Reports readers (see chart at right).



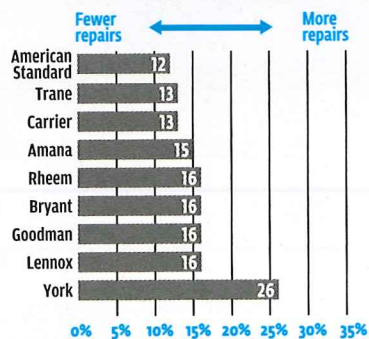
CENTRAL A/C SYSTEMS



Source: Consumer Reports Annual Reliability Survey. Findings are based on responses from almost 34,000 readers who bought a conventional or heat-pump central air-conditioning system from 2007 through mid-2013. Graphs show percentage of models for each brand that were repaired; differences of fewer than 5 points aren't meaningful, and data are adjusted to eliminate differences linked solely to age and use.



GAS FURNACES



Source: Consumer Reports Annual Reliability Survey. Findings are based on responses from almost 34,000 readers who bought a conventional or heat-pump central air-conditioning system from 2007 through mid-2013. Graphs show percentage of models for each brand that were repaired; differences of fewer than 5 points aren't meaningful, and data are adjusted to eliminate differences linked solely to age and use.

Gas Furnaces

They're not the sexiest of home purchases, but today's hot new furnaces promise steady warmth and attractive energy savings.

Replacing the old furnace in your central-heating system with a new, more efficient model can offset volatile energy prices. Money aside, today's furnaces pollute less and boost comfort by producing heat more steadily than older furnaces. Here's how to pick the best gas furnace.

Get the right fit. A furnace that's too small won't keep your house comfortable during extremely cold weather. A furnace that's too large will cycle on and off more frequently. That puts more wear on its components, wastes energy, and might cause the temperature to vary uncomfortably. Also, a larger replace-

ment furnace might require larger ducts, which can mean noisy airflow. A reputable contractor will help you size the system correctly.

Buy efficiency. How efficiently a furnace converts gas into heating energy is reflected in its annual fuel-utilization-efficiency rating, which is measured as a percentage. Price generally rises in step with its fuel efficiency, but you can often recoup that additional cost through lower fuel bills over the life of the furnace.

Pick a reliable brand. Consumer Reports' frequency-of-repair surveys (see chart at left) reveal the brands that are less likely to break.