Different temps, upstairs and down

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Q: I live in Decatur, in a 15-year-old, open-floor-plan, two-story home. The downstairs is about five to 10 degrees cooler in winter, even with a brand-new heating system. I know there is some insulation in the walls, but I don't know how much. If I wanted to add insulation, how would I go about adding it to the outer wall, and what type would be best/easiest? (There is only one wall, and it runs from floor to roof line; the other walls are windows and the garage.) Thanks.

RONDA S. KARELITZ

A: There should be no question that you have insulation in the walls of a 15-year-old home. More than likely you have 3 1/2-inch R-11 fiberglass-batt insulation. The batt insulation will completely fill the space between the wall studs, making it impossible to add more insulation. In my opinion the reason for the imbalance of heating and cooling is the "open" style of your house and the use of a single heating and cooling system for two stories.

The furnace and air conditioner will bring your house to whatever temperature your thermostat is set at. Unfortunately, the thermostat turns the system off when the temperature in the space around the thermostat reaches its setting. Because hot air rises, no matter what floor you put your thermostat on, it will always be warmer upstairs than downstairs. This is especially true with an open plan, which gives the air a lot of space to travel upward.

To resolve your problem you have two choices. You can change your house to a zoned system, meaning a separate heating and cooling system for each floor. This likely is impractical, since it would require replacement of both systems, and you have just purchased a new furnace. The other option is installation of a zone dampering system. This system uses two thermostats, one upstairs and one downstairs, and dampers in the supply ducts. The thermostats communicate with each other and the dampers open and close as necessary to balance the temperature. Sometimes the layout of the ductwork makes it impossible to install a zone dampering system. I recommend consulting a licensed HVAC contractor to find out if it is possible in your house.

Q: Our house was built in 1992 and has PVC drain pipes. We have never had any problems with them but have certainly heard about many of our neighbors having breaks and leaks. I understand that there is a class action settlement that may cover damage if the pipes break within 15 years, and we are approaching that deadline in about six months.

What do you recommend as a sensible method for dealing with the problem? Should we have the pipes replaced as soon as the settlement expires, or should we wait until there is a problem? At this time we are planning to stay in the home for about four more years. Will this cause a problem when we try to sell if we don't have the pipes replaced? What is a reasonable price to pay for replacement?

JANE DARRISH

A: I know of no class action lawsuit involving PVC pipe drain lines. You may be thinking of polybutylene supply piping. Polybutylene piping was primarily used from the early 1980s through the mid-1990s. Your house would fall within that time period. The jury is still out on exactly what caused polybutylene pipe to fail; however, there has been a successful lawsuit and settlement. The case is known as Cox vs. Shell Oil et. al. The time limit on filing a claim varies depending upon what type of fittings (elbows, T's, etc.) were used and applies only if the pipe fails. For more information on polybutylene pipe and how to determine if you have it, visit www.pbpipe.com. Or call 1-800-392-7591.

If you have polybutylene supply piping, changing it out may help your resale. A licensed, professional real estate agent will be able to help you with resale information. As for your PVC drain lines, I would definitely not replace them; they are probably working fine.