

Air duct cleaning not a cut-and-dried issue

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About this time every year, when the house has been closed up and the heating system turned on, people start asking me if they should have their air ducts cleaned.

This question has become even more frequent with the growing concern about mold and other indoor air contaminants. Unfortunately, there is not a yes or no answer to this question. The decision to have your ductwork cleaned is an individual one. To help you make a decision, here are some facts about duct cleaning:

How is it done?

Duct cleaning is a general term used to refer to the cleaning of several components of your heating and cooling systems. Those components include the ducts, the registers, the heat exchanger, heating and cooling coils, condensate drain pans, the fan motor and motor housing and the air handler unit housing. Most of these areas are not visible, readily accessible or even understood by the average homeowner, so choosing a qualified duct-cleaning contractor is critical.

Why is it needed?

If the heating and cooling system in your house has not been properly installed or maintained, it can become contaminated with particles of dust, pollen or other debris. If moisture is present in the heating and cooling system, it can promote the growth of molds. These contaminants can then be introduced into the living space through the heating and cooling ducts. Properly performed duct cleaning can remove these contaminants from the heating and cooling system.

An individual matter

Due to broad variations in the way homes are used and the sensitivity of the people living in them, there is no conclusive evidence that duct cleaning is beneficial for everyone. In fact, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, duct cleaning has never been shown to actually prevent health problems. The EPA does not recommend duct cleaning except on an as-needed basis. Some signs that may indicate that cleaning is needed are the presence of mold on the hard surfaces of heating and cooling registers, or people living in the house experiencing unusual allergic symptoms that cannot be explained by a doctor. When looking for visible signs of mold, remember that just because it looks like mold does not mean it is. To be sure a substance is mold requires sampling and laboratory testing. Other living conditions that increase the chances of duct contamination are smokers in the household, pets that shed a lot, residents with allergies or asthma and water contamination of the heating and cooling system.

Hiring and cost

The cost of duct cleaning varies with the size of your house. Typically you can expect to pay between \$450 and \$1,000. When choosing a contractor, look for someone who adheres to the standards of the National Air Duct Cleaners Association. Remember, there is no conclusive evidence of health benefits related to duct cleaning, so be cautious of contractors who make claims about health benefits or recommend making duct cleaning a part of your regular heating and cooling maintenance. Also be wary of contractors who claim to be certified. The Environmental Protection Agency offers no certification for duct cleaners.

Duct cleaning contractors may also recommend treating your ducts with chemicals or biocides. The EPA does not recommend the use of chemicals or biocides unless the homeowner completely understands the pros and cons of their use. Further information about this can be obtained from the EPA at www.epa.gov/iaq/pubs/airduct.html or by calling 404-562-9590.

For a list of duct cleaning companies in your area, contact the national air duct association at www.nadca.com or by calling 202-737-2926.

Send home repair questions to Ask the Inspector at H&G@ajc.com. Because of the volume of mail, not all questions can be answered. Our expert, Bill Garwood, spent 15 years as a building contractor before becoming a home inspector in 1990. He is part owner of a residential inspection firm and a company providing training in building inspection and codes.