

Consumer Checklist

- ➔ Learn as much as possible about air duct cleaning before you decide to have your ducts cleaned by reading this guidance and contacting the sources of information provided.
- ➔ Consider other possible sources of indoor air pollution first if you suspect an indoor air quality problem exists in your home.
- ➔ Have your air ducts cleaned if you can see substantial mold growth, pests or vermin, or if they are clogged with substantial deposits of dust or debris.
- ➔ Ask the contractor to show you any mold or other biological contamination they say exists. Get laboratory confirmation of mold growth or decide to rely on your own judgement and common sense in evaluating apparent mold growth.
- ➔ Get estimates from at least three contractors.
- ➔ Check references.
- ➔ Ask the contractor whether he/she holds any relevant state licenses. As of 1996, the following states require air duct cleaners to hold special licenses: Arizona, Arkansas, California, Florida, Georgia, Michigan and Texas. Other states may also require licenses.
- ➔ Insist that the contractor give you knowledgeable and complete answers to your questions.
- ➔ Find out whether your ducts are made of sheet metal, flex duct, or constructed of fiber glass duct board or lined with fiber glass since the methods of cleaning vary depending on duct type. Remember, a combination of these elements may be present.
- ➔ Permit the application of biocides in your ducts only if necessary to control mold growth and only after assuring yourself that the product will be applied strictly according to label directions. As a precaution, you and your pets should leave the premises during application.
- ➔ Do not permit the use of sealants except under unusual circumstances where other alternatives are not feasible.
- ➔ Make sure the contractor follows the National Air Duct Cleaning Association's (NADCA) standards and, if the ducts are constructed of flex duct, duct board, or lined with fiber glass, the guidelines of the North American Insulation Manufacturers Association (NAIMA).
- ➔ Commit to a preventive maintenance program of yearly inspections of your heating and cooling system, regular filter changes, and steps to prevent moisture contamination.

This fact sheet has been created for the H.E.L.P. for Kids Project.

The information contained in this document has been derived from the U.S. EPA document "Should You Have the Air Ducts in Your Home Cleaned" (EPA-402-K-97-002). The complete EPA document can be ordered from the U.S. EPA's Indoor Air Quality Information Clearinghouse (IAQ INFO), P.O. Box 37133, Washington D.C. 20013-7133, or by phone 1-800-438-4318.



Should You Have the Air Ducts in Your Home Cleaned?



Duct cleaning generally refers to the cleaning of various heating and cooling system components of forced air systems, including the supply and return air ducts and registers, grilles and diffusers, heat exchangers heating and cooling coils, condensate drain pans (drip pans), fan motor and fan housing, and the air handling unit housing.

Knowledge about the potential benefits and possible problems of air duct cleaning is limited. Since conditions in every home are different, it is impossible to generalize about whether or not air duct cleaning in your home would be beneficial.

If no one in your household suffers from allergies or unexplained symptoms or illnesses and if, after looking inside the ducts, you see no indication that your air ducts are contaminated with large deposits of dust or mold (no musty odor or visible mold growth), having your air ducts cleaned is probably unnecessary. It is normal for the return registers to get dusty as dust-laden air is pulled through the grate. This does not indicate that your air ducts are contaminated with heavy deposits of dust or debris; the registers can be easily vacuumed or removed and cleaned.

You should consider having the air ducts in your home cleaned if:

- 1) There is substantial visible mold growth inside hard surface (e.g., sheet metal) ducts or on other components of your heating and cooling system. There are several important points to understand concerning mold detection in heating and cooling systems:
 - Many sections of your heating and cooling system may not be accessible for a visible inspection, so ask the contractor to show you any mold they say exists.
 - Although some substances may look like mold, a positive determination of whether it is mold or not can be made only by an expert and may require laboratory analysis for final confirmation.
 - If you have insulated air ducts and the insulation gets wet or moldy it cannot be effectively cleaned and should be removed and replaced.
 - If the conditions causing the mold growth in the first place are not corrected, mold growth will recur.
- 2) Ducts are infested with vermin, e.g. (rodents or insects); or
- 3) Ducts are clogged with excessive amounts of dust and debris and/or particles are released into the home from your supply registers.

Other Important Considerations...

Duct cleaning has never been shown to actually prevent health problems. Neither do studies conclusively demonstrate that particle (e.g., dust) levels in homes increase because of dirty air ducts or go down after cleaning. This is because much of the dirt that may accumulate inside air ducts adheres to duct surfaces and does not necessarily enter the living space. It is important to keep in mind that dirty air ducts are only one of many possible sources of particles that are present in homes. Pollutants that enter the home both from outdoors and indoor activities such as cooking, cleaning, smoking, or just moving around can cause greater exposure to contaminants than dirty air ducts. Moreover, there is no evidence that a light amount of household dust or other particulate matter in air ducts poses any risk to health.

EPA does not recommend that air ducts be cleaned except on an as-needed basis because of the continuing uncertainty about the benefits of duct cleaning under most circumstances. If a contractor or advertiser asserts that EPA recommends routine duct cleaning or makes claims about its health benefits, you should notify EPA in writing at U.S. EPA, Office of Radiation and Indoor Air, 401 M St. SW, Washington, DC 20460. EPA does, however, recommend that if you have a fuel burning furnace, stove, or fireplace, they be inspected for proper functioning and serviced before each heating season to protect against carbon monoxide poisoning. Some research also suggests that cleaning dirty cooling coils, fans and heat exchangers can improve the efficiency of heating and cooling systems. However, little evidence exists to indicate that simply cleaning the duct system will increase your system's efficiency.

If you think duct cleaning might be a good idea for your home, but you are not sure, talk to a professional. The company that services your heating and cooling system may be a good source of advice. You may also want to contact professional duct cleaning contractors and ask them about the services they provide. Remember, they are trying to sell you a service, so ask questions and insist on complete and knowledgeable answers.

How to Prevent Duct Contamination

Whether or not you decide to have the air ducts in your home cleaned, committing to a good preventive maintenance program is essential to minimize duct contamination.

To prevent dirt from entering the system:

- Use the highest efficiency air filter recommended by the manufacturer of your heating and cooling system.
- Change filters regularly.
- If your filters become clogged, change them more frequently.
- Be sure you do not have any missing filters and that air cannot bypass filters through gaps around the filter holder.
- When having your heating and cooling system maintained or checked for other reasons, be sure to ask the contractor to clean cooling coils and drain pans.
- During construction or renovation work that produces dust in your home, seal off supply and return registers and do not operate the heating and cooling system until after cleaning up the dust.
- Remove dust and vacuum your home regularly. (Use a high efficiency vacuum cleaner or the highest efficiency filter bags your vacuum cleaner can take. Vacuuming can increase the amount of dust in the air during and after vacuuming as well as in your ducts).
- If your heating system includes in-duct humidification equipment, be sure to operate and maintain the humidifier strictly as recommended by the manufacturer.

To prevent moisture and mold from entering the system:

- Experts do agree that moisture should not be present in ducts and if moisture and dirt are present, the potential exists for biological contaminants to grow and be distributed throughout the home. Controlling moisture is the most effective way to prevent biological growth in all types of air ducts.
- Correct any water leaks or standing water.
- Remove standing water under cooling coils of air handling units by making sure that drain pans slope toward the drain.
- If humidifiers are used, they must be properly maintained.
- Air handling units should be constructed so that maintenance personnel have easy, direct access to heat exchange components and drain pans for proper cleaning and maintenance.
- Fiber glass, or any other insulation material that is wet or visibly moldy (or if an unacceptable odor is present) should be removed and replaced by a qualified heating and cooling system contractor.
- Steam cleaning and other methods involving moisture should not be used on any kind of duct work.