

ASK ANGI***8 things you can do to get the most out of your air-conditioning*****Paul F. Pogue**

Ask Angi TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

In many parts of the country, summer arrived early with a sweltering vengeance. Prepare for the weeks and months ahead by taking these steps to optimize your air conditioning system. Even small changes add up to potentially significant energy and cost savings. Plus, every bit of efficiency and extra power you can squeeze out of your system adds to your comfort this summer!

1. Change your filters regularly

This is the single best thing you can do for your system. Replacing filters is like changing the oil in your car; the longer you wait to do it, the more wear and tear you're adding to your system. A dirty filter makes your system work harder and use more energy. Most manufacturers recommend changing filters at least once every 90 days. Thinner and smaller filters may need to be checked more often. Your system's guidebook will have details.

2. Get an inspection

The best time to get your unit inspected and serviced is in spring before it starts running regularly. The secondbest time to get it serviced is right now. For about \$100, an HVAC technician will inspect your system, check critical components, lubricate it, and identify any problems that might be developing.

3. Make sure your home is optimized for cool air

This is a tip you don't have to plan ahead for! Close your blinds and drapes as tightly as possible, especially during the hottest hours. Blocking the sun's rays will keep you cool and take pressure off your HVAC system. Try to avoid running your oven or clothes dryer during the middle of the day. Both of these appliances add hot air to your home.

4. Care for your condenser

The outdoor condenser unit needs regular attention to keep your system in top shape. Clear out any plants and debris. You need a 4-foot radius for proper airflow. If it sits in direct sunlight, consider adding some kind of shade (while not blocking air). The hotter the condenser gets, the harder it has to work.

5. Weatherize doors and windows

Either hire a handyman to add weatherstripping, or do it yourself. Even small gaps around doors and windows can let cold air escape, and that adds up to utility costs over time. The air conditioner also has to work harder, which means it might develop problems sooner.

6. Add ceiling fans

Ceiling fans can play an important role in circulating air and providing relief during the hottest months, without adding major energy usage. Make sure your blades are set to spin counterclockwise, which pushes cool air down to the floor.

7. Upgrade your thermostat

Digital thermostats give you the ability to more precisely schedule your temperature settings. More advanced systems can be connected to your smartphone so you can adjust settings while you're away. Smart thermostats can even learn from your behavior and program themselves to adjust based on your usage patterns.

8. Upgrade your system

This is the biggest possible change, but it could yield major results. This will cost you several thousand dollars, but you'll avoid an impending blowout.