

How to Cover and Insulate Attic Access



Once the folding stairs are lowered, climb up and unzip the cover to enter the attic. Notice how well the cover is attached to the attic floor.

Courtesy of Attic Tent

Q: I just had a house built and discovered there was no insulation on the attic opening cover. I think the cover should be insulated and sealed. If I add folding stairs, how can I insulate them?

A: Builders don't always insulate and seal the attic access opening cover, but insulation certainly should be added for energy savings. Because attic access is often in the ceiling of a bedroom closet or a hallway, air leakage and heat loss or gain are seldom noticeable. During summer, attic temperatures can get extremely high and the air is humid, so you don't want that air in your living space. During winter, because the heated air in the house is less dense, it tends to leak up and out.

The simplest fix is to attach insulation to the top of the cover and weatherstripping underneath, where it rests on the lip of the opening. Measure the cover to make sure it fits the opening, with the cover overlapping the molding lip so the weatherstripping seals well. If you have to make a new cover, a piece of ½-inch drywall works well and is fire resistant.

Before you add weatherstripping to the molding lip, place the cover over it and see if it is even. The lip often consists of pieces nailed to the sides of the opening and are not level. You may have to pry a side or two loose and reattach it. If the lip is very uneven, it will be difficult to get a good seal under the cover.

In my house, I nailed a piece of ½-inch drywall to the plywood cover to give it additional weight. Next, I glued a few layers of ¾-inch polyurethane foam sheets on top of it. I added four layers to get 3 inches of foam insulation. I used foil-faced insulation so it would reflect heat from the hot roof back up during the summer.

The next step is to attach adhesive-backed foam weatherstripping to the top edge of the lip around the opening. Use thick foam to accommodate any out-of-level edges. The weight of the plywood and drywall should be adequate to compress the foam weatherstripping.

If you plan to go into your attic often and want to install pull-down stairs or a ladder—or your attic already has one—buy a special insulated cover for the attic access opening. You could attempt to make one yourself, but its weight may be hazardous to open and manage when you are on the stairs.

One of the least-expensive options is basically a three-sided heavy-duty cardboard box. It is easy to open and assemble, and you can attach your own insulation to the top and sides. It is lightweight and easy to lift and handle when you enter the attic on the stairs.

An efficient option is a lightweight, large rigid-foam domed device that covers the folded stairs or ladder from above. It is strong, and the foam provides adequate insulation.

Another design uses a flexible zippered insulated cover permanently attached to the attic floor for a good airtight seal. The zipper provides a large opening for easy access to the attic.

TogetherWeSave.com, an energy-efficiency website from the nation's electric cooperatives, has two videos on this subject. Visit <http://energysavings.togetherwesave.com/watch-and-learn>, and click on the Sealing & Insulation tab, then scroll down to find how-to videos on insulating attic hatches and attic pull-down stairs.

The following companies offer attic entrance products:

- ▶ Atticap
(781) 259-9099
www.draftcap.com
- ▶ Attic Tent
(877) 660-5640
www.attictent.com
- ▶ Battic Door
(508) 320-9082
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- ▶ Calvert Stairs
(866)477-8455
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- ▶ Rainbow Attic Stairs
(203) 322-0009
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