

Stay Comfortable This Winter

Q: Last winter was our first in the older home we bought. Even with the heat turned up, it always felt chilly. We added insulation, but are there additional steps we can take to make the house more comfortable this winter?



A blazing fire in the fireplace provides warmth, but chimneys can pull warm air outdoors when not in use.

Photo by Pixabay



An annual tuneup of your heating system can increase your system's efficiency.

Photo courtesy of the National Renewable Energy Laboratory and the U.S. Department of Energy



To ask a question, send an email to **Patrick Keegan** at energytips@collaborativeefficiency.com.

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A: When we talk about comfort in our homes, we usually think about the thermostat. There is more to the picture than just the indoor temperature.

An important piece of the comfort puzzle is radiant heat, which transfers heat from a warm surface to a colder one. A person sitting in a 70-degree room can still feel chilly if there is a cold surface nearby, such as a single-pane window, a hardwood floor or an exterior wall.

Covering these cold surfaces can help. Try using area rugs, wall quilts or tapestries, bookcases and heavy curtains to help prevent heat loss.

Keep in mind, radiant heat can work in your favor. A dark-colored tile floor that gets several hours of direct sun can retain heat during the day and radiate it into the room during the evening.

Another possible cause of discomfort during the winter is air movement. We recognize this when weather forecasts report chill factor, which is a calculation of air temperature and wind speed.

Moving air makes us feel colder, which is why we use fans in the summer. During the winter, cold, outdoor air can infiltrate our homes.

On average, a typical home loses about half of its air every hour. That amount can increase when outdoor temperatures are extremely cold and the wind is blowing. In this case, the best way to keep your home toasty is to minimize air leaks. You can easily locate air leaks in your home with a blower door test, which is typically conducted by an energy auditor. These are some of the most common spots air leaks occur:

- Penetrations and cracks around windows and doors.
- Exterior cracks in brickwork and siding.
- Plumbing and wiring penetrations from the exterior to the interior.

- Mail slots or pet doors.

Products such as caulk, weatherstripping, outlet cover gaskets and dryer vent covers can help seal leaks.

A fireplace also can be a source of air leakage. If you don't use the fireplace, seal the opening or install an inflatable chimney balloon. Before using the fireplace, consider this: Unless you have a high-efficiency insert, your fireplace will suck heated air from the room out through the chimney. Always close the fireplace flue when not in use.

Your pursuit of comfort should include a look at your home's heating system. Is it distributing heat evenly and efficiently? Forced-air systems distribute air through supply ducts and registers.

Small rooms may have only one register, but large rooms could have several. Some supply registers may blow copious amounts of warm air, while others blow little at all. Ideally, every room should have return air registers. If you see possible shortcomings with your forced-air system, enlist the help of a certified contractor who knows how to improve ductwork.

Ensure your furnace is running at peak efficiency by scheduling an annual inspection. Check your filter monthly, and replace or clean it as necessary. If you heat your home with radiators, bleed them at the beginning of the season so they flow more efficiently.

Beyond that, you can always warm yourself by wearing heavier clothing, doing some light exercise throughout the day and snuggling with a pet or under a blanket.

By taking some of these small steps, hopefully you will enjoy a more comfortable winter in your older home. ■

This column was co-written by Pat Keegan and Brad Thiessen of Collaborative Efficiency. For more information on staying comfortable in winter, visit www.collaborativeefficiency.com/energytips.