

Rating furnace efficiency

No matter how you look at it, heating the typical Canadian home through the winter is an expensive proposition. While homeowners have no control over the cost of the fuel, they can ensure that it is put to good use by maintaining an efficient heating system.

Furnace efficiency is measured in two ways: seasonal efficiency and steady-state efficiency.

Seasonal efficiency measures the performance of a furnace over the entire heating season, taking into account equipment start-ups and shutdowns, when furnaces are generally least efficient. Seasonal efficiencies can only be calculated under extremely controlled conditions, and are not available for most furnaces in Canada.

That means most homeowners must rely on steady-state efficiency ratings to determine just how well their furnace is doing its job. This rating measures only the percentage of available heat delivered by the furnace during its peak operating stages (after it has warmed up and before it begins to cool down). Steady-state efficiency ratings are almost always higher than seasonal ratings for the same furnace. In other words, the actual performance over the entire heating season will never be as good as indicated by a steady-state efficiency test.

Most furnace technicians are equipped and trained to conduct steady-state efficiency tests. Efficiency ratings for oil furnaces can fluctuate widely from year to year, so it's a good idea to test your furnace's efficiency once a year during your routine maintenance check. If you own a natural gas furnace, you may decide to have it tested less often since efficiencies will not vary significantly from year to year (you should still have the furnace serviced before each heating season to ensure that it is operating safely and efficiently).

After your furnace has been operating for about 10 or 15 minutes, your technician will perform two tests to determine its steady-state efficiency. The first test measures carbon dioxide concentrations in the flue gases, while the second measures the temperature of gases in the flue.

The results of these tests will enable the technician to rate the efficiency of your furnace compared with other similar units. (The table at the end of this article will enable you to relate the carbon dioxide concentration and the flue gas temperature to the steady-state efficiency of your furnace). Discuss the findings and ask the technician for advice on remedying any problems. If the efficiency rating is low, the technician should make the necessary adjustments and follow this up with another efficiency test.

Older oil furnaces should have a steady-state efficiency of 70 to 80 per cent. Newer conventional units have ratings of about 85 per cent. Condensing oil furnaces can offer steady-state efficiencies of up to 95 per cent.

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