

Give your home a fall tune-up

Once again, it's the time of year to pack away the beach balls, lawn chairs and other summer paraphernalia and brace your home for the onslaught of cooler weather.

And while winter may still seem like a distant reality, it will arrive on your doorstep sooner than you think - literally.

So, before you get "left out in the cold," with a drafty, poorly insulated home, now's the ideal time to give it a thorough fall tune-up to make sure it operates at peak level this fall and winter.

Much like the engine of a car, your home deserves ongoing maintenance. And

since your home likely represents the largest single investment you've ever made, doesn't it make sense to treat it to some tender loving care?

Check windows and doors
It's a good idea to start with a thorough check of your windows and doors. Cracks around these areas can let in chilly drafts while letting valuable heat out.

You can check for drafts quite easily by holding up a feather or a piece of tissue paper suspended from a hanger to the areas where you suspect there may be leaks. If the feather or tissue moves independently, you've located a draft.

To solve this problem, you can caulk or apply weather stripping. These can be purchased at your local hardware or building centre. Both materials are available under

a wide variety of product names.

If your windows or doors are in extremely poor shape, you may want to think about replacing them altogether with some of today's energy-efficient alternatives.

Also make sure there are no drafts coming in around your power outlets. These should be properly insulated as well.

Synthetic foams
For large gaps or holes, there are several varieties of synthetic spray-foams that you can buy. A small amount is squirted into the gap and it expands to fill the hole. Excess material can then be removed. This dense filler is an ideal way to insulate around difficult, hard-to-reach areas.

When using any of these products, be sure to read the manufacturer's instructions

and follow them carefully, because some substances can irritate skin and eyes.

Check basement
Conduct the same draft test on all floors of your home - including your basement. And while you're down there, check around for any cracks or holes in the foundation walls - if your basement is unfinished. These should be repaired before they worsen. If you don't think you'll be able to handle the job yourself, consult an expert.

If your basement is unfinished and especially chilly, you may want to think about insulating the whole thing. Again, if you're not particularly handy, you may want to hire a contractor for this type of undertaking.

Furnace or boiler
While still in the basement, be sure to check your

furnace or boiler. This, after all, is the "hub" of your heating system and requires regular maintenance to give you good performance. Ideally, it should be checked annually by an expert to make sure everything is in good working order.

It's probably advisable to try and book a "checkup" or cleaning with your utility or fuel company before the fall

Also be sure and move any items you may have stored near or around your furnace or boiler before turning it on - and make sure the space around it is clean and free of dust or combustible materials.

It's also a good idea to check your attic to see what kind of shape your insulation is in. It may need to be topped up. If you're not sure, consult an expert.

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