

MAINTAINING PLUMBING AND HEATING SYSTEMS IN THE HOME



This advice guide is part of a series of free guides produced by the Association of Plumbing & Heating Contractors Ltd. which provide consumers with essential basic information on a range of plumbing and heating matters including installations, repairs and maintenance.

We take most domestic plumbing and heating systems for granted. It can be easy to overlook the servicing and maintenance required for these appliances. Regular servicing and maintenance will ensure the appliances and systems run safely and efficiently whilst potentially avoiding expensive repairs. Here are some simple recommendations that you need to consider.

Heating appliances

It is vital that all appliances are serviced, at least once a year to make sure that they are safe, working correctly and are operating efficiently. Regular maintenance will prevent damage that could lead to the appliance producing dangerous fumes.

Heating appliances can be broken down into two main groups, fuel burning appliances (often referred to as combustion appliances) and non-fuel burning appliances.

Fuel burning appliances, are as the name suggests heating appliances that need a fuel and an ignition. The fuel type will include Natural Gas, LPG, Kerosene, Gas Oil, Coal and Wood Logs, Chips or Pellets including appliances referred to as Biomass.

The range of fuel burning appliances include, Central Heating Boilers, Open Fires, Stoves, Room Heaters, Range Cookers, Instantaneous Water Heaters, along with, Micro Combined Heat and Power Units. Non-fuel burning appliances include, Air or Ground Source Heat Pumps and Solar Thermal Panels.

As a minimum, all appliances require annual servicing and/or maintenance; however, this is dependent on each manufacturer's service and maintenance instructions. If you don't have a copy of the service and maintenance instructions for your appliance you can normally find a copy for free on the manufacturer's website or if you telephone them, they will generally send you a copy by post. You will need the exact model name and name of the manufacturer to find the required instructions.

Remember – Only a competent and qualified engineer should service and maintain your heating appliances. Check the engineer's qualifications to ensure they are competent for the fuel AND appliance they are servicing.

Engineers carrying out work on gas-fired appliances must be registered with the Gas Safe Register (formally CORGI). These details can be confirmed on their website www.gassaferegister.co.uk.

The Guild of Master Chimney Sweeps recommends that all non-gas appliances with a conventional flue be swept regularly to stop any problems or blockages occurring.

Recommended sweeping frequencies include:

- Smokeless coals - At least once a year
- Wood - Up to four times a year
- Bituminous coal - Twice a year
- Oil burning - Once a year

Smoke alarms and carbon monoxide alarms

Annual servicing of the heating appliance is also a good reminder to change batteries in smoke alarms and carbon monoxide alarms.

Some alarms will give off a loud beep, when the batteries run low, but you should not rely on this, always test your alarms once a month and change the batteries every year, even if the batteries are still working – recycle them and use them in a toy or piece of entertainment equipment.

Air source heat pumps

If you have an air source heat pump you are likely to be advised that a yearly visual inspection should be carried out to check that the air inlet grill and evaporator are free of leaves or other debris. Any plants that have started to grow near the heat pump unit will also need to be removed.

Ground source heat pumps

The Ground Source Heat Pump Association advises that there is no need for safety checks for ground source heat pumps and that routine maintenance requirements are very low. However, you should always follow the manufacturer's servicing and maintenance instructions.

Solar thermal hot water systems

Maintenance costs for solar water heating systems are generally very low. However, it is important to check that no leaks develop in the system. This can be done visually, or often there will be a strong smell of anti-freeze. Another indicator of a problem is a lack of hot water or hot pipes coming from the solar panel. If this happens, it is important to get in touch with the installation company or a qualified installer straight away.

The system manufacturer will recommend the duration of servicing, however, as a guide, annual checks should be completed by a competent installer and every 3-4 years it will be necessary to top up or re-fill the system anti-freeze to make sure the system is still operating safely and at its maximum efficiency.

Unvented hot water cylinders

Unvented hot water cylinders provide efficient hot water to larger properties. It is important that the cylinder is checked at least annually to make sure that the water inside the cylinder can expand as it is heated and the valves operate correctly.

If you see water coming from one of the valves or pipes outside your home, you should call an APHC member straight away to assess what is happening and repair the problem, even if you are still getting hot water at the taps.

Rainwater guttering systems

After autumn, it is a good opportunity to ensure any guttering is clear and free of leaves and other debris that could slow the flow of water or even block the guttering system. Visually check and ensure the guttering looks secure and brackets are in place. If in doubt and to help avoid damaging the property, consider instructing a plumber to repair any leaks in the guttering.

Water supply stop valve (stop tap)

It is important to locate and regularly ensure that the supply stop valve (stop tap) is working and has not seized up. The valve should turn easily. Once closed, check at the kitchen tap, to ensure that no water is running. Close the kitchen tap and open the water supply stop valve. Once fully open, turn back a quarter of a turn.

In summary

APHC recommends regular maintenance of any installed appliance. Avoiding such maintenance can cause serious damage to the appliance and in some cases endanger lives.

About APHC

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