

MAINTAIN YOUR FURNACE

Heating is the biggest energy expense in most homes. A well-maintained furnace runs more efficiently and lasts longer, typically 15 to 20 years.

Repair. Unless a key part such as the heat exchanger or control module breaks, it makes more sense to repair your furnace than to replace it.

Simple maintenance steps include checking your furnace filter monthly during the heating season and cleaning or changing it as needed, dusting heat registers and keeping furniture away from them, and scheduling an annual furnace checkup. For more information, go to www.ConsumerReports.org/furnaces. Also replace the batteries in your programmable thermostat and in smoke and carbon-monoxide detectors.

Replace. Furnace efficiency ranges from 78 to 97 percent. But high-efficiency models are usually more expensive. So compare both initial and operating costs of several models. When it comes to reliability, our 2006 survey found little differ-

ence among 10 major gas furnace brands.

Avoid buying a furnace that's bigger than you need. Besides being more expensive, an oversized furnace cycles on and off more frequently, which wastes fuel, can wear out furnace components, and can be noisy and cause uncomfortable temperature swings. To find the right furnace, have your con-

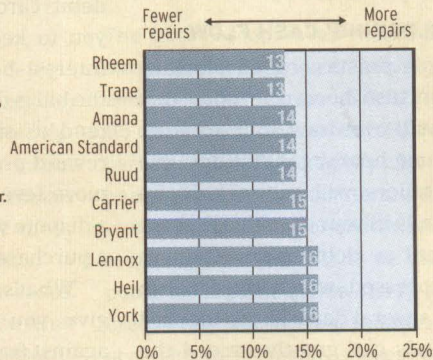
tractor calculate capacity based on home size, design, construction, and climate. Avoid contractors who suggest that you just buy the same-size furnace you already have.

Remember, the best time to replace your furnace and get a better deal is in the fall or spring, when contractors aren't juggling emergency heating or cooling calls.

Brand repair history: gas furnaces

We found no statistically meaningful differences in percent of models ever repaired for the brands listed below. For 5 of the 6 years examined, Goodman furnaces were much less reliable than the listed brands. Goodman isn't listed because the sample size in 2001 was slightly too small.

Data are based on more than 22,000 reader responses about gas furnaces installed between 2000 and 2006 in our Annual Product Reliability Survey conducted by the Consumer Reports National Research Center. Data are adjusted to eliminate differences linked solely to climate and product age. Models within a brand may vary. Changes in design or manufacture might affect reliability.



Also beware of those who offer low bids or excessive proposals. A basic inspection and sweeping will last up to 90 minutes and cost about \$150 to \$300.

DOING THE JOB RIGHT

The sweep should start by asking you about chimney problems, repairs made, and how often the fireplace has been used since the last sweeping. He'll place drop cloths around the work area and shut off the furnace.

Next, he'll head up to the roof to inspect the chimney and flashing, and look for potential problems such as overhanging tree limbs. He'll clean the chimney from the roof, then come inside and clean the firebox with brushes and a special vacuum.

After clearing the chimney of debris, the sweep will examine it using a mirror and flashlight. He'll point out any other problems.

The Chimney Safety Institute of America, a nonprofit group, lists certified sweeps on its Web site, at www.csia.org.

