

Maintenance Must-dos

By John N. Frank

First-time buyers often don't know much about home maintenance. You can help by giving them a maintenance schedule that'll prevent small problems from turning into big headaches.

Our maintenance checklist was compiled with the help of Lou Manfredini, Ace Hardware's home improvement spokesperson and star of the "Mr. Fix-It" show on Chicago's WGN-AM radio, and Frank Lesh, president of the American Society of Home Inspectors and head of his own home inspection company, Home Sweet Home Inspection Co., in Indian Head Park, Ill.

Schedule for Replacement

Average life span (in years)

Exterior painting	5-10
Furnace	15-50
Roof	13-15
Water heater	7-15
Wood deck staining	4-7

Inside Tasks

- **Change your furnace filters monthly.** "It's so easy to do but so critical," says Lesh. Clogged filters decrease furnace efficiency and can cause breakdowns.
- **Drain your water heater at least once a year.**

Sediment will drain out along with the water from the water tank. Removing sediment can prolong the heater's useful life.

- **Clean the coils.** If you have baseboard heating units that use hot water, clear dust from the coils inside the units to maximize heating efficiency. Clean dust whenever you see it accumulating. If you have a hot water boiler/furnace, you should also oil the pump inside the furnace twice a year, says Lesh. Look for the three spots on the pump designated for oiling.
- **Check your circuits.** Test the performance of the circuit breakers in your electrical circuit box twice a year by flipping them off and back on. If you have a circuit that keeps shutting off with normal daily electrical use, call an electrician. A faulty circuit breaker could indicate a short in the wiring inside your walls.
- **Watch out for drips.** Check under sinks periodically to look for leaks or water stains that might indicate leaks. Catching a small problem early can prevent water damage. Use a plunger to clean out sinks and tubs whenever water doesn't drain normally.
- **Replace regularly.** Water heaters, furnaces, roofs, and other key components of your home should be replaced before they fail, based on their average useful lives (*see schedule at left*).

Outside Tasks

- **Keep the wet out.** Water is a major enemy of your house. Check each season for signs of water damage to your home. Flashing, the metal pieces used to seal the areas between roofs and chimneys and around doors and windows, are especially vulnerable to damage by wind or age. Loose flashing can let water seep under a roof or inside walls, which in turn can cause mold.
- **Get to the bottom of things.** Check your home's foundation for cracks or gaps that could let in water or varmints. Also look at the ground around your house. As homes age, they often sink slightly below the surrounding ground. This settling lets water puddle against the foundation and possibly damage it, notes Manfredini. Doing major landscaping work also can cause changes to the ground's pitch that let water flow toward the house.
- **Look up.** Chimneys take a great deal of weather abuse. Visually inspect them each year for signs of loose mortar or loose or missing bricks. Have the insides of chimneys cleaned every two to three years. Also check your roof for loose shingles or dangling gutters.

