

Ten steps to a winterized home

By Erin K. Witt

As winter's icy grip begins to tighten on central Indiana, many Hoosiers will seek comfort in the warmth and security of their own home. Unfortunately, failing to take proactive steps to winterize that home can result in a long, cold season of unexpected, costly repairs. To prevent this from occurring, experts advise homeowners to give their house a thorough once-over and fix problems well before the first snowflakes fly.

The Homeownership Education Resource Organization suggests the following ten tasks to help ensure a safe and snug home this winter.

Tip #1: Inspect roof coverings, flashings and the chimney, and weatherproof as needed. An improperly sealed roof can leak, causing major damage throughout the entire structure. Look for missing and cracked caulk around vents and chimneys, and any loose items that may need to be refastened.

Tip #2: Check windows and doors for cracks and gaps. Forty-six percent of heat is lost around glazed areas in windows and doors. Using proper caulking or a window insulation kit can save large amounts of energy during the cold winter months. Door sweeps should also be installed on the bottom of doors leading outside your home, or to unheated areas. These sweeps attach to the bottom of a door and prevent air from escaping from underneath. Foam or weather-stripping may also be useful tools.

Tip #3: Check to be sure the hot water heater is properly insulated. If the tank surface feels warm to the touch, wrap it with additional insulation, available at most hardware stores. Make sure the airflow of a gas-fired water heater is not blocked, and never wrap this type of unit with combustible materials like old blankets or quilts.

Tip #4: Winterize your air conditioner. Call a service professional to properly prepare your central air conditioner for the winter months. Doing this can greatly prolong the life of the unit and keep it operating efficiently. If your home has a window air conditioning unit, purchase a cover to protect it from winter weather. Less contact with moisture means less chance for rust or mechanical malfunction. A good cover will also prevent cold air from entering your home through the unit's seams.

Tip #5: Clean out gutters and downspouts. Clogged downspouts hold water that can eventually back up into the roof and cause damage. Trapped leaves can also become waterlogged and freeze, potentially causing the gutter to break. Dig out larger pieces of debris and flush downspouts out with a garden hose. This should be done seasonally, but is especially important after the fall of autumn leaves.

Tip #6: Check your furnace and clean or replace filters. Installing a new furnace filter at least annually improves the efficiency of your furnace and your home's air quality. Use manufacturer recommended replacement filters. It is also a good idea to have your furnace serviced by a qualified professional. They can make sure the thermostat and pilot

light work properly, and that the pipe bringing fuel to your furnace isn't leaking or loose. A professional cleaning and inspection can increase the efficiency and life of the furnace—and a well-maintained unit uses 10 percent to 15 percent less energy.

Tip #7: Place socket sealers over all electrical outlets. Surprisingly, open outlets can be responsible for up to 20 percent of the heat lost in a home. Socket sealers are more than child safety features; they lower utility bills as well. They are easy to find, inexpensive to buy and simple to install. But remember: always turn off the power when installing these devices.

Tip #8: Install a programmable thermostat. Digital thermostats can help reduce energy bills by automatically “throttling down” the heat during selected times, like when you are sleeping or at work. This can lead to big savings—it’s estimated that for every degree you lower the thermostat, you’ll save two percent on your heating bill. Be sure to keep the house warm enough, though—the temperature in the home should be at least 65 degrees. The temperature inside the walls where the pipes are located is substantially colder than the walls themselves. A temperature lower than 65 degrees will not keep the pipes from freezing.

Tip #9: Check the snow load on your roof. Remove roof snow and ice—especially if it is built up six inches or more. Snow and ice put a lot of force on a roof, often causing leaks and potentially major structural damage. Clearing your roof soon after a fresh snowfall with a roof rake is easiest, since snow is not yet packed. This proactive maintenance also helps prevent the opportunity for difficult-to-remove ice to build.

Tip #10: Insulate pipes in your home's crawl spaces and attic. Winter winds whistling through overlooked openings can quickly freeze exposed water pipes. Remember: the more insulation you use, the better protected your pipes will be. Heat tape or thermostatically controlled heat cables can also be used to wrap pipes.