Smart Tips for Harford County Heating Maintenance This Winter

When temperatures drop in northeastern Maryland, keeping a home warm becomes more than a comfort issue. It is a matter of safety, efficiency, and cost. For homeowners across the region, understanding how their heating system works and what it needs to perform well through a cold winter can make a real difference. Harford County heating systems face a mix of demands: older homes with drafty windows, newer constructions with tight envelopes, and everything in between. Each setup has its own quirks, and knowing how to handle them is part of responsible homeownership.

Know Your System Before You Need It

One of the most common mistakes people make is waiting until the first cold snap to think about their furnace or heat pump. By then, any underlying issue becomes an emergency. A better approach is to give the system a thorough check in early fall. That means inspecting the air filter, listening for unusual noises when the unit fires up, and checking the thermostat calibration. A thermostat that reads a few degrees off can cause the system to run longer than necessary, driving up energy bills without keeping the house comfortable.

For those with forced-air systems, ductwork deserves attention too. Leaky ducts in an unconditioned attic or crawlspace can waste a significant amount of heated air before it ever reaches the living space. Sealing visible gaps with mastic or metal tape is a straightforward DIY job. For deeper duct issues, a professional assessment is worth the investment. The same goes for heat pumps: outdoor units need clearance from leaves, snow, and debris. A blocked coil forces the system to work harder and can shorten its lifespan.

Filters Matter More Than You Think

The air filter is the single most accessible component on most heating systems, and it is also the one most often neglected. A dirty filter restricts airflow, which makes the blower motor work harder and can cause the heat exchanger to overheat. In a furnace, an overheated heat exchanger can crack, leading to carbon monoxide risks. For heat pumps, restricted airflow reduces efficiency and can cause the compressor to cycle on and off too frequently.

View the location on Google Maps

How often should you change the filter? It depends on the filter type and your household conditions. A basic fiberglass filter should be replaced every month during heavy use. Pleated filters with a higher MERV rating can last up to three months, but they also create more

resistance. If you have pets or smokers in the house, check the filter more often. A good habit is to look at it monthly and replace it when it looks dirty. This simple step can improve indoor air quality and help your Harford County heating system run more efficiently.

Thermostat Strategies for Real Homes

Programmable and smart thermostats have been around long enough that most people understand the basic idea: set the temperature lower when you are asleep or away, and warmer when you are home. But the execution often falls short. A common mistake is setting the setback too extreme. Dropping the temperature by more than ten degrees can actually cause the system to struggle when it tries to recover, especially in a poorly insulated home. A five to eight degree setback is usually enough to save energy without making the house feel cold for hours.

Another overlooked factor is location. If the thermostat sits in a hallway that gets direct sunlight or is near a drafty window, it will read inaccurately. The system may short-cycle or run too long. Moving the thermostat to a more central location, or using remote sensors with a smart thermostat, gives better temperature control. For homes with zoned systems, make sure each zone's thermostat is calibrated correctly. An imbalance between zones can lead to cold spots and wasted energy.

Pilot Lights, Igniters, and Safety Checks

Gas-fired heating equipment relies on either a standing pilot light or an electronic ignition system. Standing pilots are less common in modern units but still found in older furnaces and boilers. If the pilot light goes out, it is often due to a draft, a dirty orifice, or a faulty thermocouple. Relighting it is simple, but if it keeps going out, there is likely an underlying issue that needs professional attention.

Electronic ignition systems are more efficient because they only use energy when the furnace calls for heat. However, they have their own failure points. A dirty flame sensor is one of the most common causes of a furnace that starts but then shuts off after a few seconds. Cleaning the sensor with a bit of emery cloth can often fix the problem. But if you are not comfortable working around gas and electrical components, it is best to call a technician. Safety comes first. Carbon monoxide detectors are essential in any home with a gas furnace. Check the batteries twice a year and replace the detector itself every five to seven years.

Heat Pumps: Not Just for Cooling

Many homeowners in the Mid-Atlantic region use heat pumps as their primary heating source. A heat pump works like an air conditioner in reverse, extracting heat from the outdoor air and

moving it inside. Even when it is cold outside, there is still some heat in the air. But as temperatures drop below freezing, the heat pump's efficiency declines. That is when the auxiliary or emergency heat strips kick in. These electric resistance heaters are effective but expensive to run.

To avoid relying on auxiliary heat too often, keep the thermostat set at a steady temperature. Frequent adjustments force the heat pump to use backup heat more often. Also, make sure the outdoor unit is clear of ice and snow. Some units have a defrost cycle that melts ice buildup, but heavy snow can block airflow. Gently brushing snow off the unit, without damaging the fins, helps maintain performance. For those considering a new system, a cold-climate heat pump designed for lower temperatures can be a good option, but it is worth discussing the trade-offs with a local installer who understands the specific demands of Harford County heating.

Boilers and Radiant Systems

Homes with hot water boilers or steam heat have a different set of maintenance needs. Boilers are generally durable and efficient, but they require attention to water quality and pressure. The pressure gauge should read around 12 to 15 psi when the system is cold. If it drops too low, the system may not circulate water properly. Adding water through the feed valve is simple, but if you find yourself doing it often, there may be a leak somewhere in the system.

Air can get trapped in radiators or baseboard loops, causing cold spots and gurgling sounds. Bleeding the radiators releases that air and restores proper heat distribution. Use a radiator key to open the valve slightly until water starts to come out, then close it. For steam systems, the water level in the sight glass is critical. Too little water can cause the boiler to overheat; too much can cause water hammer and poor steam distribution. Annual maintenance by a qualified technician is recommended for any boiler system.

Draft Proofing Without Overdoing It

Sealing air leaks is one of the most cost-effective ways to improve comfort and reduce heating costs. Common leak points include windows, doors, attic hatches, and where pipes or wires enter the house. Caulk and weatherstripping are easy to apply and last for years. But there is a balance to strike. A house that is too tight can trap moisture and pollutants, leading to mold growth and poor indoor air quality. That is why mechanical ventilation, such as an energy recovery ventilator, is sometimes needed in newer, well-sealed homes.

For older homes, the priority should be sealing the biggest leaks first. An infrared thermometer or a simple incense stick can help locate drafts. Focus on the attic floor and basement rim joists, where a lot of heat loss occurs. Adding insulation to the attic is another high-impact project. The recommended R-value for attics in Maryland is R-49 or higher. Even if you cannot

do a full insulation upgrade, sealing air leaks and adding a layer of insulation over the existing one can make a noticeable difference.

When to Call a Professional

Some heating issues are best left to a trained technician. If you smell gas, hear unusual banging or screeching sounds, or notice the system short-cycling, it is time to call for help. Regular professional maintenance once a year, typically in the fall, can catch problems before they become emergencies. A technician will check the heat exchanger for cracks, measure gas pressure, clean the burners, and verify safety controls. This kind of preventative care extends the life of the equipment and keeps it running safely.

For residents looking for reliable service, Hoot Heating & Air, located at 301 W Main St, Rising Sun, MD 21911, can be reached at (410) 658-6564 for heating needs.

Staying warm through a Maryland winter does not have to be complicated. A little attention to filters, thermostats, and basic maintenance goes a long way. Knowing your system, understanding its limits, and acting before problems arise are the keys to a comfortable and efficient home. Whether you rely on a furnace, heat pump, or boiler, the principles are the same: keep it clean, keep it clear, and keep it serviced. That is the real secret to dependable Harford County heating year after year.