

Heater and Air Conditioner (HVAC) Care and Maintenance

By David Spencer CAC Chairman

Fall and spring are good times to check out the operation and maintenance of home HVAC systems.

Heaters: Unless your heater unit has been replaced recently it is older than 20 years. Accordingly, it is becoming progressively more important with each passing year to check the safety condition of your attic or closet heater unit. Only a licensed and qualified HVAC technician should perform this task.

Signs of a poorly operating heater system may be noticed by a noisy fan motor, poor flame adjustment, signs of cracks in the burn chamber housing, which if undetected will eventually increase the level of carbon monoxide in your home, inefficient register venting, lack of recent filter changing and/or higher than usual heating bills. Moreover, unsafe heater units can result in an attic fire. Be safe—check it out.

Air Conditioners: At least two homes have experienced significant water damage because both the primary and secondary air conditioner (AC) drains were clogged.

The AC evaporator unit located either in the attic or closet dehumidifies your home. The condensate water drains out to a plumbing fixture usually located underneath a bathroom counter sink. It may also be located under a downstairs bar sink. When the primary drain becomes clogged, water is diverted to the secondary drain. Secondary drains are routed to the outside of the house in a place designed to annoy you like over the front door. Look for the PVC pipe sticking out of the siding somewhere up around the second story. If the secondary drain becomes clogged, then you will experience flooding in the location of the evaporator unit—most likely located in the attic or closet. The resulting damage will cost you big bucks.

Preventive measures are simple and don't require a plumber. Here is what you do. First, locate where the primary drain is attached to the plumbing, probably under a bathroom or bar sink. Turn off the AC at the thermostat. Lay a towel under the drain. Place a small bucket on top of the towel. Then remove the metal clamp around the hose going into the under sink plumbing. Disassemble the U-shaped pipefitting. Usually this is only hand tight. Clean out whatever gunk was clogging the line. Reassemble the U-shape pipefitting and reattach the AC drain hose. Finally, turn on the AC unit and verify that condensate water is no longer draining out of the secondary drain line.

Final notes: These instructions primarily apply to townhomes. Roof top mounted AC units and patio home AC units may have different configurations that require different primary drain clearing procedures. Replacement HVAC systems may have an automatic shut-off switch in lieu of a secondary condensate drain. In this case, the AC unit will shut down automatically if the primary drain is clogged.