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Regularly cleaning your air ducts can improve indoor air quality, reduce the amount of allergens in the air and lower your heating and cooling bills.

In general, homeowners should have their air ducts cleaned every three to five years. However, it may need to be done more often if people smoke in the home, you have pets that shed or someone in your family suffers from allergies or a respiratory illness.

The following signs could indicate that your ventilation system is dirty:

- Visible dust in the ducts
- Dirt buildup around the registers
- Worsening allergy symptoms
- Respiratory distress

It's also important to have your air ducts cleaned after any home renovation. Dust and debris from the project can clog your ventilation system and render it inefficient. You should also clean them if water has infiltrated your ducts, as inhaling mold spores can seriously impact your health.

In addition, many new homeowners choose to have their ventilation system inspected and cleaned prior to moving into a new home. Air duct cleaning isn't something that the average homeowner can do on their own. A proper cleaning requires specialized vacuums with filters that can trap even the smallest particles of dust and dirt. For this reason, it's best to hire a pro.
Are you thinking about creating a playroom for your kids? If so, here are four things that will make it child friendly and the perfect place to play.

1. Different zones. Create separate areas in the room to make crafts, read books and do homework. Make sure they also have an open area for imaginative play.

2. Ample storage. Storage solutions like shelving units and bookcases can help keep stuff off the floor. Smaller boxes and baskets are perfect for keeping toys organized.

3. The ideal location. If your children are still young, you may want their playroom to be close to where the family gathers so you can keep an eye on them. However, older kids may prefer a space of their own in the basement or elsewhere.

4. Child-friendly textiles. Your children need comfortable surfaces like sofas, chairs and rugs to relax and play, but these will get dirty quickly. Washable fabrics make cleaning up easy. You may also want to choose patterned materials, which are better at hiding stains.

To ensure your children don’t grow out of their playroom too soon, avoid decorating it with their favorite cartoon characters or colors that may seem too childish in the years to come. Opt for timeless decor and furniture that can grow with them.

Four elements of the PERFECT PLAYROOM

Opt for timeless decor and furniture in a playroom that can grow with your children.
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Within the home, you and your family rely on many components to maintain your safety. This spring make time to inspect these important systems to ensure they are working efficiently.

It can be easy to overlook household items that aren’t always used, so be sure to analyze this sometimes-lifesaving equipment.

**Smoke detectors**

According to the United States Fire Administration, you should replace your smoke alarms every ten years. It’s easy to find the date it was manufactured by looking on the back of the detector. Ensure they are installed in every bedroom, outside each sleeping area and on every level of the home. You should also test the alarms at least once a month by engaging an easily identifiable button and change the batteries at least annually. If you are due for an upgrade, consider investing in smart detectors that alert synced alarms throughout the home at the first sign of smoke.

**Fire extinguisher**

Another important safety device to keep in optimal condition is a fire extinguisher. The National Fire Protection Association suggests making them clearly visible and easily accessible in the home. You should also periodically investigate the pressure gauge near its lever. Upon further inspection, analyze it for obvious signs of damage or wear. Most quality extinguishers are rated for five to 15 years of use but can vary by manufacturer, so regular inspections are important.

**Locks**

If the locks on your doors are degrading in integrity, you may be at risk of losing your valuables and risking the safety of your family. Go throughout your home and test each lock on every exterior door. If they are difficult to operate or the door can be budged open while they are engaged, a replacement is necessary.

Hire the help of a local locksmith to rekey your home with high-quality locks and deadbolts. To add a modern touch of innovation to the simple lock, ask about options that are operated by key fob or smartphone applications.

**Home security system**

One of the most effective measures you can take toward your property’s defense is investing in a home security system. Many companies offer 24/7 emergency contact and will alert you and the authorities when their alarms deem a threat is imminent. It offers great peace of mind whether you’re home or way.
Your mortgage payment is only the beginning of the true costs of owning a home. One expense you should factor into your budget is routine maintenance. According to U.S. News and World Report, homeowners can expect to spend 1-4 percent of their home's value annually on maintenance and repairs. The repairs fall into a few notable categories.

**Furnace and HVAC**

The government-run Energy Star program recommends having a contractor perform a checkup on your home's heating and cooling system once a year. According to Angie's List, a tune-up should cost about $70 to $100. In addition, air filters should be changed once a month, as a dirty filter can cause the system to function inefficiently and cause damage.

Since the cost of having your HVAC vents cleaned can get into the hundreds of dollars, weigh this decision carefully.

The Environmental Protection Agency recommends having your ducts cleaned only if there is visible mold growth or a vermin problem, or if the ducts are clogged with excessive dust and debris.

**Pest control**

Pests in the home can hit your nerves and your wallet. ImproveNet.com lists the price of a pest control service at $250.

The types of pests you may find in your home vary greatly by region and your home's immediate surroundings, so contact a service provider for a quote tailored to your home.

**Bathrooms/plumbing**

Even minor plumbing problems can get expensive quickly. You may want to stay ahead of trouble by having a plumber give your home a once over annually.

Aside from checking fixtures and pipes for leaks or conditions that could lead to a leak, the plumber also will check all appliances that use water, such as the water heater and dishwasher. ImproveNet.com lists the average price of hiring a plumber at $259.

**Exterior**

It's a good idea to have a professional check the condition of your roof each spring. A routine inspection and minor repairs (such as replacing a few missing shingles) should cost $100 to $150, according to Houseologic.com.

A lush, green lawn can be a beautiful thing, but it comes at a cost. The expense of fertilizing, winterizing, aerating and mowing can add up. ImproveNet.com lists average costs of $61 for mowing, $170 to $333 for tree maintenance, $12 to $40 for weeding and $404 for winterizing. Fertilization can cost an average of $.26 per square foot, plus an average of $32.71 per hour for a landscaper to apply the fertilizer.

Experts recommend having your home's gutters cleaned at least once a year (or more often if you have pine trees). Homeadvisor.com lists the average cost of window cleaning at $207.

An annual chimney inspection runs about $75, according to Angie's List, while a cleaning costs about $178. Seal-coating an asphalt driveway, which you may want to do annually or every few years, costs an average of $385 but varies with size.
Falling down a flight of stairs can lead to a serious injury. In fact, it’s the second leading cause of unintentional injuries worldwide, behind only motor vehicle accidents. To make sure the stairs in your home are safe, consider implementing the following strategies.

- Add some grip. Stairs made of wood, polished concrete or tile can be slippery. Add some tread using carpet, stair runners or rubber mats. If you prefer the look of bare stairs, there are non-slip coatings available that are simply brushed on like paint.
- Keep the light on. Make sure the lighting in your stairway is at least as bright as that of the surrounding hallways. It’s also a good idea to install nightlights so you don’t miss a step at night.
- Don’t forget handrails. If possible, install handrails on both sides of the stairs. These should extend slightly from the top and the bottom, be between 34 to 38 inches high and strong enough to withstand the weight of an adult.
- Use a gate. If there are young children or pets in your home, you may want to consider using gates around the stairs. The best ones are attached directly to the wall and don’t have any bars that can be used to climb over. Most falls on residential staircases happen because there’s something in the way. For this reason, be sure to keep the steps clear at all times.
Once considered outdated, wallpaper has made a comeback in recent years. Here are three reasons to choose wallpaper instead of paint for your home.

1. It makes an impact. With a wide range of colors, patterns and textures to choose from, wallpaper makes it easy to make a statement in your home. And there’s an option to suit every style, from bold, geometric patterns to pastel floral prints and more.

2. It’s long-lasting. Wallpaper that’s been properly hung can last 15 years or more. In addition, it holds up better in high-traffic areas of your home than paint, which should be reapplied at least every five years.

3. It’s easy to remove. Modern, non-woven wallpapers are designed to easily peel away from the wall in one big sheet. Unlike older types, there’s little risk of damaging the wall underneath.

If you love the look but aren’t ready to commit, many companies make temporary wallpaper that’s easy to put up and take down.
Built-in shelving units provide extra storage that’s perfectly suited to your home’s layout and decor. Here are some things to consider when designing your own.

Your needs
What you plan to put on your built-in shelving unit will impact its design. For example, if you’re displaying a collection, you may choose to build specialized shelves.

If you’re planning to store things you want to keep hidden, you can add some doors to conceal the bottom shelves.

The location
There are likely a number of places in your home that could accommodate built-in shelving. Your living room may be a great spot for a custom bookcase, your kitchen may need the extra storage space and your fireplace might look better when flanked with shelving.

The shelves
Most books will fit on a standard eight-inch shelf, but you may require more space. If this is the case, make the bottom few shelves deeper than the top ones.

Finally, keep your home’s aesthetic in mind when designing your shelving unit. If the area has moldings or other decorative accents, mimicking them in your design will help tie the room together.
Does your home have wood paneling that needs to be updated? If so, here are some great ways to modernize it.

- **Paint it.** This is the quickest and easiest way to update your wood paneling. White or bright colors will look fresh and clean, while darker ones will feel moody and somber. Or, consider whitewashing the wood using watered-down paint. This will lighten the panels while preserving the grain.

- **Camouflage it.** Use dry-wall compound to fill in the grooves between panels. Follow this with a coat of primer and your choice of paint. No one will be able to tell that the walls are paneled.

- **Refinish it.** Solid wood panels can be sanded and stained like any other wood surface. Choose a lighter tone for a Scandinavian feel or opt for a stain that mimics mahogany for a more luxurious look.

  If you love wood paneling and want it in your home, be sure to choose wide panels over thin ones and stay away from orangey tones, as these tend to look dated. Also, consider mounting your panels horizontally or diagonally instead of vertically for a more modern design.

If you choose wood paneling, try to avoid orange tones that tend to look dated.
An accent wall is a striking way to make a room more dynamic. Here are three ways you can add one to your home.

1. Paint. This is the easiest way to create an accent wall. For a subtle difference, opt for varying tones of the same shade. If you prefer a dramatic look, choose a color that contrasts nicely with the rest of the room.

2. Wallpaper. If you prefer a patterned or textured accent wall, wallpaper is just what you need. Choose a pattern with a color scheme that matches the rest of the room for an effect that’s pleasing to the eye.

3. Bricks. Exposed brick walls look great in almost any type of room. If your home doesn’t already have this feature, you can create your own using regular bricks and mortar, or you could mimic the look with textured wallpaper or thin bricks intended as decoration.

Accent walls are the perfect way to play with color, texture and design in your home. And because they only occupy one wall in a room, they won’t overpower the space they’re in.
Choosing the right freezer for your needs

Are you running out of room in your freezer? If so, a stand-alone freezer may be just what you need. Here are some factors to think about when choosing one.

Type
There are two kinds of stand-alone freezer:
- Chest freezers generally offer more space per cubic-foot than upright models. However, their design makes it harder to find things, as there are usually no shelves or drawers to help organize your food.
- Upright freezers have shelves and drawers that make it easy to organize your goods. They take up less floor space than chest freezers but have less usable space.

Size
Both freezer types are available in a variety of sizes. Your choice will depend on where you’re planning to put it, what you want to store and the size of your family.
As a general rule, plan for 1.5 cubic feet for each member of your family. However, hunters, gardeners and people who buy food in bulk may need a bigger freezer than a family simply wishing to keep a supply of frozen pizzas on hand.

Features
Many newer freezers have features that make them much more convenient to use. They may include alarms that alert you if the temperature has dipped, locks to block access or make sure the door stays closed and dividers and tiered bins for chest freezers. Some upright freezers even offer soft-freeze zones, so you never have to deal with completely hardened ice cream again.

To make sure your freezer works as efficiently as possible, place it somewhere away from heat sources and aim to keep it no more than two-thirds full.
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