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Keeping the House Cool in the Summer

By Karen Mayne

Hot! Hot! Hot! The dog days of summer are here. What did we ever do without air conditioning? Acted liked dogs, of course, and took a lot of cat-naps in the summer. Is your air conditioning system up to the challenges of summer's hottest days? Here are some tips from the *Virginian Pilot's* "Summer Maintenance" column (June 18, 2011) for getting the most energy efficiency from your unit.

Keep Your House Cooler

Block the sunlight by closing window coverings while the sun is shining through the windows.

Keep supply registers and return vents free by moving away any furniture that blocks air movement. And keep registers open even in unoccupied rooms. Central air conditioning works better when all the registers in the house are open.

Turn off the oven and lights. An oven can add as much heat to the air as an air conditioner can take out in the same amount of time. Cook out on the grill or use the microwave instead. Incandescent light bulbs turn only 10 percent of the electricity to light – the other 90 percent is converted to heat. Switching to compact fluorescent bulbs saves electricity and can help keep your house cooler.

Keep the windows closed. This seems obvious, but some people open windows while the air conditioning is on. This allows hot, humid air inside and just makes the air conditioner work harder.

Minimize the humidity in your house.

Air conditioners work by removing humidity from the air, so don't add any more moisture than necessary. Use the bathroom exhaust fan when showering. Run dishwashers, washing machines, and dryers in the evening when outside temperatures and humidity are lower.

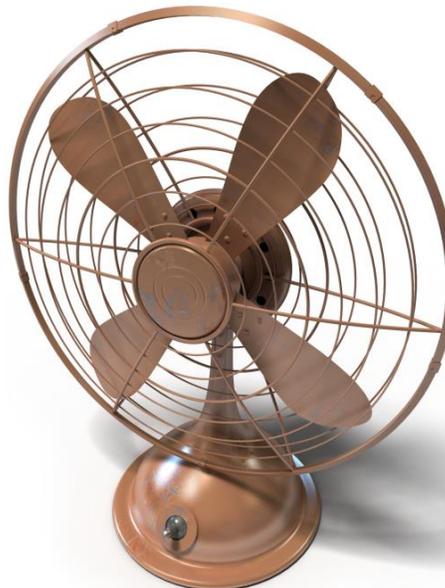
Help the Air Conditioner Work Efficiently

Leave the unit on all day. When outside temperatures are in the 80s and 90s, the air conditioner can keep the house cooler if it is left on all day, since it doesn't have to play "catch-up" in the evening. A programmable thermostat will let you adjust temperatures throughout the day and night, while keeping the unit on.

Keep the air filters clean. Clogged air filters make the unit work harder. Follow the manufacturer's recommendations on how often to change the filter – usually every one to three months.

Set the unit's fan to automatic. New research shows that when the unit's fan is set to run all the time (the "on" setting), it pulls in more hot, humid air from the outside, and makes the air conditioner work harder. The "automatic" setting will only run the fan when the air conditioner is actually running, thus keeping more of the conditioned air inside the house.

Keep the air conditioner tuned up. Make sure the outside condensing unit is clear of debris and that no plants are blocking the flow of air to the unit. The drain pipe must also be clear to allow the condensate water to drain away. An annual check-up by a qualified technician is recommended to make sure the unit is working properly and that no refrigerant is leaking out. If you can't afford to do so annually, go no more than three years without a service check-up.



Bigger undertakings include things like caulking and sealing air leaks around doors and windows, cracks and holes; sealing and insulating duct work; and improving insulation in the attic and under the sub-floor in the crawl space. If it's time for a new roof, consider light color shingles or the new "cool roof" shingles that reflect some of the sun's rays. Adding improved attic ventilation such as attic fans can also keep the attic cooler, thus making it easier for the air conditioning unit to keep the house cool. Planting trees or shrubs on the sunny side of the house will add shade to help cool the house.

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