Baseline Home Maintenance

Home Maintenance Guide 2026

Every maintenance task here is grouped by the most serious thing that can happen when it is skipped. Each figure comes from a government agency, a research group or a manufacturer listed on the last page.

Orange = what you can do yourself. **Blue = professional service.**

Task	Who	How often	What skipping it risks
Priority 1: Protects lives			
Professional check of furnace, water heater and other gas appliances	Pro	Every year, before heating season	Carbon monoxide poisoning: about 66 deaths a year from heating systems.
Test smoke and carbon monoxide alarms	You	Test monthly; new batteries yearly	Home fire death rates more than double without a working alarm.
Clean the dryer lint filter and vent pipe	You	Filter every load; vent every 3 to 12 months	Fire. Failure to clean is the leading cause of home dryer fires.
Professional dryer and vent cleaning	Pro	Twice a year	Lint builds up inside the dryer and vent where you can't reach.
Test the water heater relief valve	You	Every year	Unsafe pressure or temperature in the tank.
Clean the oven and stovetop	You	As needed; deep clean yearly	Fire. Failure to clean is a factor in 9% of home cooking fires.
Priority 2: Prevents water damage			
Inspect and replace washer hoses	You	Check every 6 months; replace at 5 years	A burst hose. Washer claims average more than $5,300.
Flush the water heater and check its anode rod	Pro	Every 6 to 12 months	A corroded, leaking tank. Claims average about $4,400.
Inspect the refrigerator ice maker line	You	Every 6 months	The supply line causes 73% of ice maker water losses.
Priority 3: Prevents breakdowns and saves energy			
Check the furnace and AC air filter	You	Check monthly; replace by 3 months	Higher bills and early failure. A clean filter cuts AC energy use 5% to 15%.
Air conditioner tune-up	Pro	Every spring	Lost efficiency, and water damage from a plugged drain.
Keep the water heater at 120°F	You	Set once; check yearly	Scalds, wasted energy and faster mineral buildup.
Check the water softener salt	You	At least monthly	Hard water returns and scale builds up.
Priority 4: Keeps appliances clean and working			
Clean the dishwasher filter; run a cleaning cycle	You	Filter every few months; cycle monthly	Dirty dishes, film and odors.
Run a washer cleaning cycle	You	Monthly or every 30 loads	Odor and residue buildup.
Replace the refrigerator water filter	You	Every 6 months	Slow water flow and a starved ice maker.

Your Year at a Glance

Orange = what you can do yourself. **Blue = professional service.**

When	What you can do	Professional service	Why then
Every month	Test smoke and CO alarms Check the furnace and AC filter Check softener salt Run washer and dishwasher cleaning cycles		Short tasks that catch problems early
Spring	Inspect washer hoses and the ice maker line Replace the refrigerator water filter Clean the dryer vent pipe	Air conditioner tune-up Dryer and vent cleaning Water heater flush	ENERGY STAR advises a cooling check-up before warm weather
Fall	Replace alarm batteries Test the water heater relief valve Inspect washer hoses and the ice maker line Replace the refrigerator water filter Deep clean the oven	Furnace and gas appliance inspection Dryer and vent cleaning Water heater flush and anode rod check	Most carbon monoxide deaths happen November through February; dryer fires peak in January
Every 5 years	Replace washer fill hoses		Hose failures climb after 5 years
Every 10 years	Replace smoke alarms		Alarms wear out

Replace the furnace and AC filter whenever it looks dirty, and at least every 3 months. Your owner's manuals come first: if a manual gives a different interval for your model, follow the manual.

How to Read This Guide

How tasks are ranked

The priority groups reflect the kind of harm a skipped task can lead to, not how likely it is. A dryer fire or a carbon monoxide leak is rare, but the result can be fatal, so those tasks come first. A dirty dishwasher filter is common, but the worst result is spotty dishes.

How strong the evidence is

Each task in this guide names where its recommendation comes from. Not all sources carry the same weight.

Source type	Examples	What to know
Federal data	Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), U.S. Fire Administration, Department of Energy, ENERGY STAR	National counts and tested guidance. The strongest evidence here.
Fire-safety research	National Fire Protection Association (NFPA)	National estimates built from fire department reports.
Insurer research	Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety (IBHS)	Based on closed insurance claims, so it shows what failures cost. The study dates from the 2000s.
Manufacturer guidance	A. O. Smith, Rheem, Whirlpool, Maytag, GE	What the maker requires or recommends for its own product. Your manual comes first.
Industry-funded study	Battelle study for the Water Quality Research Foundation	Independent lab, but paid for by the water treatment industry.
Baseline schedule	Baseline Home Maintenance	Our own recommended interval, used where no public source gives one.

The numbers behind the priorities

227
Accidental carbon monoxide deaths a year from consumer products (2019 to 2021 average)
CPSC

15,970
Home fires a year involving dryers or washers; 92% involve dryers (2010 to 2014)
NFPA

57%
Home fire deaths in homes with no smoke alarm or none that worked (2012 to 2016)
NFPA

$5,300+
Average washing machine water damage claim, after the deductible
IBHS

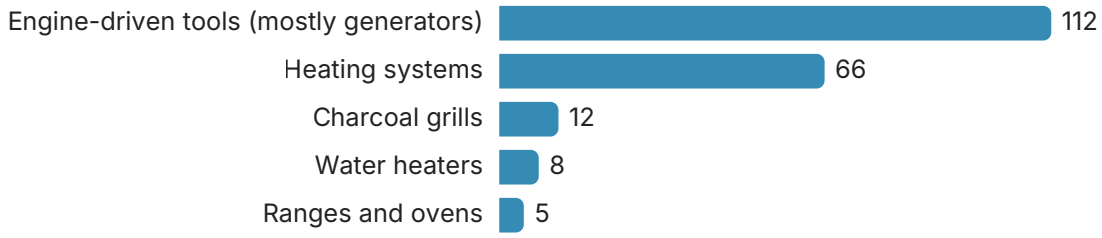
3 of 4
Water heaters that fail before they are 12 years old
IBHS

Nearly half
Share of a typical home's energy bill that goes to heating and cooling
ENERGY STAR

Furnace and Gas Appliances

Why it matters: carbon monoxide has no color or smell. The CPSC counts an average of 227 accidental deaths a year from consumer products, and heating systems are the second-largest source. More than half of these deaths happen from November through February, and most happen at home.

Accidental carbon monoxide deaths per year by product, 2019 to 2021 average (CPSC)



Heating systems include central furnaces and portable heaters. In 2021, about 4 in 10 heating-system deaths involved propane equipment, mostly unvented portable heaters.

Task	How often	Why it matters	Source
What you can do			
Check and replace the air filter	Check monthly; replace at least every 3 months	A dirty filter raises energy costs and can lead to early equipment failure.	Federal data (ENERGY STAR)
Professional service			
Professional inspection of the furnace, water heater, flues and vents	Every year, in the fall	Finds blocked or leaking flues and combustion problems before the heating season. The CPSC calls this the first line of defense against carbon monoxide.	Federal data (CPSC)

What a heating tune-up covers

ENERGY STAR's contractor checklist for heating systems:

- Check gas connections, gas pressure, burner combustion and the heat exchanger. Faulty gas connections are a fire hazard, and a dirty burner or cracked heat exchanger makes the furnace less safe and less efficient.
- Inspect the flue piping for rust, loose joints and signs of back drafting.
- Tighten electrical connections and measure voltage and current on motors. Loose connections are unsafe and shorten the life of major parts.
- Lubricate moving parts, check the controls, and confirm the system starts, runs and shuts off properly.

If a carbon monoxide alarm sounds: get everyone outside to fresh air, then call 911 or the gas company from outside.

Smoke and Carbon Monoxide Alarms

Why it matters: alarms are the backup when everything else fails. NFPA found that almost three of every five home fire deaths happened in homes with no smoke alarm (40%) or with alarms that did not work (17%).

Deaths per 1,000 reported home fires, 2012 to 2016 (NFPA)



Why smoke alarms failed to sound in reported home fires (NFPA)



Two of every three alarm failures came down to the battery. That is why the yearly battery change matters.

Task	How often	Why it matters	Source
What you can do			
Test every smoke and CO alarm	Monthly	Confirms the alarm will sound. Only about one in five households test monthly.	Federal data (CPSC); NFPA
Replace the batteries	Every year, unless the alarm has a sealed 10-year battery	Missing, disconnected or dead batteries are the main reason alarms fail.	Federal data (CPSC); NFPA
Replace old smoke alarms	At 10 years old	Alarms wear out. NFPA found many had stopped working after 8 to 10 years.	Fire-safety research (NFPA)

Where alarms should be

- **Smoke alarms:** on every level of the home, inside each bedroom and outside sleeping areas.
- **Carbon monoxide alarms:** on every level of the home and outside sleeping areas.

The CPSC suggests changing batteries when the clocks change, so the task is easy to remember.

Dryers and Dryer Vents

Why it matters: lint burns easily, and it builds up in the filter, inside the dryer and along the vent. Two national studies count dryer fires differently, but both name the same leading cause: failure to clean.

	U.S. Fire Administration	NFPA
What was counted	Dryer fires in residential buildings, 2008 to 2010	Home fires involving dryers or washers, 2010 to 2014 (92% dryers)
Fires per year	2,900	15,970
Deaths and injuries per year	5 deaths, 100 injuries	13 deaths, 440 injuries
Property loss per year	$35 million	$238 million
Share blamed on failure to clean	34%, the leading factor	31%, the leading cause

Factors contributing to home dryer fires, 2008 to 2010 (U.S. Fire Administration)



Task	How often	Why it matters	Source
What you can do			
Clean the lint filter	Every load; scrub with a nylon brush every 6 months	Dust, fiber and lint are the first thing to ignite in more than a quarter of dryer fires.	Federal data (U.S. Fire Administration)
Clean lint out of the vent pipe, or hire a professional	Every 3 months (U.S. Fire Administration) to once a year (NFPA)	Lint collects in bends and long runs where the airflow can't push it out. A blocked vent overheats the dryer.	Federal data; NFPA
Professional service			
Professional dryer and vent cleaning	Twice a year (Baseline schedule); sooner if drying slows	The U.S. Fire Administration advises regular professional cleaning, especially when clothes take longer to dry. Gas dryers should be inspected by a professional every year.	Baseline schedule; U.S. Fire Administration

Warning signs: heavy items like towels or jeans take unusually long to dry, clothes feel hotter than normal at the end of a cycle, or the outside vent flap doesn't open when the dryer runs. Vent ducts should be rigid or semi-rigid metal, never plastic or foil.

Water Heaters

Why it matters: a tank water heater rusts from the inside. IBHS found that 69% of water heater failures were a slow leak or a sudden burst, that the chance of a leak rises sharply once a tank is 5 years old, and that the average tank failed at 10.7 years.

69%
Water heater failures that were a slow leak or sudden burst
IBHS

$4,400
Average claim after the deductible
IBHS

4% to 22%
Yearly water-heating energy saved by setting the tank to 120°F instead of 140°F
U.S. Department of Energy

Task	How often	Why it matters	Source
What you can do			
Operate the temperature and pressure relief valve	At least once a year	This valve releases water if pressure or temperature gets too high. One maker warns that skipping the check can allow unsafe pressure to build.	Manufacturer guidance (A. O. Smith, Rheem)
Set the temperature to 120°F	Once; check yearly	Prevents scalds, saves energy and slows mineral buildup and corrosion.	Federal data (CPSC, Dept. of Energy)
Professional service			
Drain and flush the tank	Every 6 months (IBHS) to yearly (manufacturers)	Removes sediment. Sediment builds faster in hard water.	Insurer research; manufacturer guidance
Inspect the anode rod	Every 1 to 2 years; yearly after the warranty ends	The rod corrodes so the tank doesn't. Once it is used up, the tank starts to corrode and will eventually leak.	Insurer research; manufacturer guidance
Professional check of gas water heater venting	Every year	Gas water heaters are linked to about 8 carbon monoxide deaths a year.	Federal data (CPSC)

Washing Machines

Why it matters: the fill hoses are under constant water pressure. IBHS found that more than half of washing machine water damage claims came from a failed hose, and that claims averaged more than $5,300 after the deductible. A burst hose can release about 650 gallons an hour.

Share of washer hose failures that had happened by each age (IBHS; 'more than half' and 'nearly 80%')



The average failed hose was 8.7 years old. Replacing hoses at 5 years gets ahead of most failures.

Task	How often	Why it matters	Source
What you can do			
Inspect the fill hoses	Every 6 months	Look for cracks, kinks or blisters, most often near the connection. Leave 3 to 4 inches behind the washer so hoses don't kink.	Insurer research (IBHS)
Replace the fill hoses	Every 5 years	Failure rates climb sharply after 5 years. Braided stainless steel hoses are stronger.	Insurer research; manufacturer guidance
Run a cleaning cycle	Monthly or every 30 loads	Controls the soil and detergent buildup that causes odors.	Manufacturer guidance (Whirlpool, Maytag)
Clean the drain pump filter (front-load models with access)	Every 2 months (Baseline schedule)	Lint and debris in the filter can slow draining.	Baseline schedule; Whirlpool
Professional service			
Professional service	Every 2 years (Baseline schedule)	Baseline's recommended interval.	Baseline schedule

Water Softeners and Hard Water

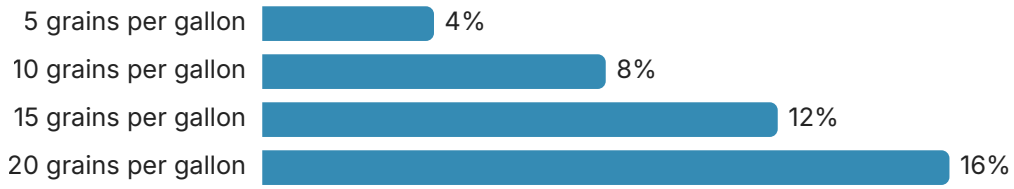
Why it matters: a softener only works while it has salt. When it stops, hard water reaches every fixture and appliance. In the Battelle study, showerheads on hard water lost 75% of their flow in under 18 months, and dishwashers and washers showed scale that needed cleaning after 30 days of heavy testing.

Task	How often	Why it matters	Source
What you can do			
Check the salt level	At least monthly	If you see water above the salt, add salt. A hard crust with a gap beneath it is a salt bridge and should be broken up.	Manufacturer guidance (Culligan, EcoPure)
Check the hardness setting	At setup and after service	Jordan Valley Water asks customers to match the setting to the water. Too high a setting wastes salt and sends it downstream.	Jordan Valley Water
Professional service			
Professional service	Every 3 years (Baseline schedule)	Baseline's recommended interval.	Baseline schedule

What hard water does to a water heater

Local water is hard, and sediment and scale build faster in hard water. Jordan Valley Water reports about 10 grains per gallon, and Salt Lake City's main sources range from 8 to 12, with some wells far higher. A lab study found each 5 grains per gallon costs a gas tank water heater about 4% of its efficiency.

Gas tank water heater efficiency lost at each hardness level (Battelle study, 50 gallons of hot water a day)



The study was run by Battelle, an independent lab, and paid for by the water treatment industry. At 10 grains per gallon the loss works out to about 8%.

Air Conditioning

Why it matters: nearly half of a typical home's energy bill goes to heating and cooling. Small problems make the system run longer for the same comfort.

Efficiency a cooling system can lose, upper end of published ranges (ENERGY STAR, U.S. Dept. of Energy)



Each figure is the top of a published range: refrigerant 5% to 20%, filter 5% to 15%, airflow up to 15%. They are separate estimates and should not be added together.

Task	How often	Why it matters	Source
What you can do			
Check and replace the air filter	Check monthly in summer; replace at least every 3 months	Replacing a clogged filter with a clean one can lower an air conditioner's energy use by 5% to 15%.	Federal data (Dept. of Energy, ENERGY STAR)
Professional service			
Professional cooling tune-up	Every spring	See the checklist below.	Federal data (ENERGY STAR)

What a cooling tune-up covers

ENERGY STAR's contractor checklist for cooling systems:

Step	Why it matters
Clean the indoor and outdoor coils	Dirty coils cool less and make the system run longer, raising costs and shortening equipment life.
Check the refrigerant charge	Too much or too little can lower efficiency by 5% to 20%.
Clean and adjust the blower	Airflow problems can reduce efficiency by up to 15%.
Inspect the condensate drain	A plugged drain can cause water damage and affect indoor humidity.
Tighten electrical connections; check controls	Loose connections are unsafe and shorten the life of major parts.

Call for service when

- The system runs much longer than usual or can't reach the set temperature
- You see water around the indoor unit

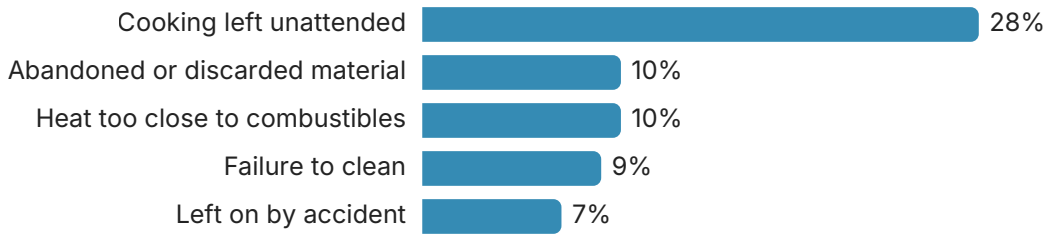
Kitchen Appliances

Oven and range

Why it matters: cooking is the leading cause of home fires: about 158,400 a year, with 470 deaths. Most start with unattended cooking, but failure to clean is a factor in 9%, roughly 14,000 fires a year (our arithmetic). NFPA's advice is to keep the stovetop, burners and oven clean.

What you can do: wipe up spills and grease as they happen, and deep clean the oven interior once a year.

Leading factors in home cooking fires, 2017 to 2021 (NFPA)



Refrigerator

Task	How often	Why it matters	Source
What you can do			
Inspect the ice maker water line and shut-off valve	Every 6 months	The supply line caused 73% of ice maker water losses. Leave 3 to 4 inches behind the fridge so the line doesn't crimp.	Insurer research (IBHS)
Replace the water filter	Every 6 months, or when flow slows	A clogged filter restricts water to the dispenser and ice maker.	Manufacturer guidance (GE)
Check the condenser coils	Every 3 to 6 months with pets, dust or heavy kitchen use	Clean coils help the fridge cool efficiently and hold steady temperatures. In a normal home, routine cleaning usually isn't needed.	Manufacturer guidance (Whirlpool)
Professional service			
Professional service	Twice a year (Baseline schedule)	Baseline's recommended interval.	Baseline schedule

Dishwasher

Task	How often	Why it matters	Source
What you can do			
Clean the filter	A few times a year; more with heavy use	Keeps water flowing and stops food particles from washing back onto dishes.	Manufacturer guidance (Whirlpool)
Run a cleaning cycle	About every 30 days; more often with hard water	Prevents film, spotting and odors from mineral and detergent buildup.	Manufacturer guidance (Whirlpool)
Professional service			
Professional service	Every 2 years (Baseline schedule)	Baseline's recommended interval.	Baseline schedule

Sources

Federal: CPSC, Non-Fire Carbon Monoxide Deaths Associated with the Use of Consumer Products, 2021 Annual Estimates (2025); CPSC carbon monoxide alarm guidance and annual heating inspection advisories; CPSC tap water scald alert. U.S. Fire Administration, Clothes Dryer Fires in Residential Buildings (2008 to 2010 data) and (2002 to 2004 data), and dryer fire safety outreach. ENERGY STAR, Guide to Energy-Efficient Heating and Cooling and Maintenance Checklist. U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Saver: air conditioner maintenance; lowering water heating temperature.

Fire-safety research: NFPA, Smoke Alarms in U.S. Home Fires (2019); Home Fires Involving Clothes Dryers and Washing Machines (2017); Home Cooking Fires (2023).

Insurer research: IBHS water damage studies of closed claims (washing machines, water heaters, ice makers), as published by the Connecticut Insurance Department and IBHS; State Farm, "A $30M Load of Laundry."

Manufacturers: A. O. Smith, State and Rheem water heater manuals; Whirlpool and Maytag product help (washer, dishwasher, refrigerator care); GE Appliances (water filters); Culligan and EcoPure (softener care).

Water: Salt Lake City Department of Public Utilities, 2026 Water Quality Report; Jordan Valley Water Conservancy District. Battelle Memorial Institute softened water study for the Water Quality Research Foundation (2010).