OTTAWA HVAC PRO

How-To Guides

Step-by-step HVAC instructions for Ottawa homeowners

15 Expert Answers from Construction Brain

ottawahvacpro.ca/construction-brain

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Q1

How do I find and seal duct leaks?

Duct leaks are a common source of energy waste in Ottawa homes — a leaky duct system can reduce your heating and cooling efficiency by 20-30%, meaning you're paying to heat or cool your attic or crawlspace instead of your living areas.

Finding Duct Leaks

The easiest way to spot leaks yourself is to run your furnace or air handler and feel along accessible ductwork with your hand. You're looking for air blowing out at joints, seams, and connections — especially where sections of duct meet or where branches split off the main trunk. Visible signs include disconnected sections, gaps at joints, or duct tape that has dried out and pulled away (ironically, standard duct tape fails quickly in HVAC applications). You may also notice rooms that are consistently harder to heat or cool, or higher-than-expected energy bills.

Sealing Duct Leaks Yourself

For accessible ductwork in your basement or mechanical room, this is one of the few HVAC tasks a handy homeowner can tackle safely. The right product is **mastic sealant** — a thick, paste-like compound you brush on with a paintbrush or gloved hand over joints and seams. For larger gaps, embed **fiberglass mesh tape** into the wet mastic before it dries. **UL 181-rated foil tape** is also acceptable for metal ducts. Avoid standard hardware store duct tape — it dries out and fails within a few years.

Ottawa-Specific Context

Ottawa's climate makes duct sealing particularly worthwhile. With heating seasons running roughly October through April, even moderate duct leakage adds up significantly on your gas bill. If your ducts run through an unheated garage, attic, or crawlspace, sealing and insulating those sections should be a priority. Enbridge and Hydro Ottawa sometimes offer rebates tied to home energy audits — a certified energy advisor can perform a **blower door test** combined with **duct pressurization testing** to precisely measure your leakage rate, which is far more accurate than a manual inspection.

When to Call a Professional

If your ductwork is in hard-to-reach areas, if you suspect significant leakage throughout the system, or if you're seeing major comfort or efficiency problems, professional duct sealing or duct cleaning is the better route. Technicians can also identify if ducts are improperly sized or if there are design issues causing the problem. If you notice any issues near your furnace's heat exchanger or flue connections, **stop and call a professional immediately** — those areas involve combustion gases and are not DIY territory.

For a whole-home duct assessment or professional sealing, Ottawa HVAC Pro can inspect your system and give you an honest picture of where your losses are. Request a quote and we'll take a look.

Q2

How do I read my furnace error codes?

Most modern furnaces communicate problems through a **blinking LED light** on the control board, typically visible through a small sight glass or panel on the furnace cabinet. The number of blinks in a sequence corresponds to a specific error code listed on a diagnostic chart — usually found on a sticker inside the furnace door.

How to read the blink pattern: The LED will flash a series of blinks, pause, then repeat. For example, 3 blinks, a pause, then 3 blinks again means "Error Code 3." Some furnaces use a two-digit system — 3 blinks followed by 2 blinks would be Code 32. Count carefully and write down the pattern before opening any panels or touching anything.

Finding your error code chart: Once you have the blink count, look for the diagnostic sticker on the inside of your furnace's lower access panel. It will list each code and its meaning (e.g., "Code 3 = Pressure Switch Fault"). If the sticker is missing or faded, search your furnace's model number online — you can usually find the full diagnostic chart in the manufacturer's installation manual.

Common codes Ottawa homeowners see include pressure switch faults (often caused by a blocked condensate drain on high-efficiency furnaces), ignition failures, and flame sensor issues. These are all repairable, but the underlying cause matters — a pressure switch fault could mean anything from a dirty filter to a cracked inducer motor.

On the safety side, if your furnace is throwing error codes related to the heat exchanger, flame rollout, or high limit switch, **stop running the system and call a technician immediately.** These can indicate conditions that allow carbon monoxide to enter your home. Never ignore a heat exchanger warning.

Once you have your error code, a licensed technician can diagnose the root cause quickly. If you'd like help interpreting a specific code, feel free to share it here — or **contact Ottawa HVAC Pro for a diagnostic visit**, typically $200–$350, which is applied toward the repair cost.

Q3

How do I check my refrigerant level?

Checking refrigerant levels requires specialized equipment and should only be done by a licensed HVAC technician. Refrigerant systems are sealed and pressurized, making this a job for professionals with proper gauges and certification.

Signs your system may be low on refrigerant include reduced cooling performance, ice buildup on the evaporator coil, hissing sounds near the outdoor unit, or higher than normal energy bills. However, these symptoms can also indicate other issues like dirty filters, blocked airflow, or mechanical problems. Low refrigerant typically means there's a leak somewhere in the system, since refrigerant doesn't get "used up" during normal operation.

In Ottawa's climate, **refrigerant issues are particularly noticeable during our hot summer months** when your AC system works hardest. The most common refrigerant types in residential systems are R-410A (in newer systems) and R-22 (in older systems being phased out). Each requires specific handling procedures and environmental regulations must be followed during any refrigerant work.

Safety is critical when dealing with refrigerant systems. Refrigerant can cause frostbite if it contacts skin, and improper handling can damage your system or create environmental hazards. Additionally, adding refrigerant without fixing the underlying leak is wasteful and won't solve the problem long-term.

What you can check yourself is whether your air filter is clean, vents are unobstructed, and the outdoor unit has clear airflow around it. If you suspect refrigerant issues, turn off your system and contact a licensed technician who can properly diagnose the problem with manifold gauges and determine if refrigerant service is needed.

For professional refrigerant service in Ottawa, request a quote from Ottawa HVAC Pro - our licensed technicians can safely diagnose and repair any cooling system issues.

Q4

How do I check my furnace ignitor?

A faulty ignitor is one of the most common reasons furnaces won't start, but checking it requires caution since you'll be working near gas components. Always turn off power to your furnace at the electrical panel before beginning any inspection.

Visual inspection is the safest approach for homeowners. Remove the furnace access panel (usually held by screws or clips) and locate the ignitor - it looks like a small ceramic or silicon carbide element, similar to a glowing coil. Look for obvious cracks, breaks, or burn marks on the ignitor itself. A cracked ignitor will need replacement even if it still glows, as it won't generate enough heat to reliably light the gas.

The glow test can help confirm ignitor function, but should be done carefully. With the power restored, set your thermostat to call for heat and observe the ignitor through the access panel opening. A working ignitor should glow bright orange or white-hot within 30-60 seconds. If it doesn't glow at all, glows dimly, or takes longer than 90 seconds to reach full brightness, it's likely failing. However, **never attempt to touch or remove the ignitor yourself** - these components are fragile and gas appliance work requires a licensed G2 technician under TSSA regulations.

In Ottawa's climate, ignitors typically last 3-7 years depending on usage. If your furnace is cycling on and off without producing heat, or you hear the draft motor running but no ignition occurs, a faulty ignitor is often the culprit. Professional replacement usually costs $200-400 including the service call.

If you suspect ignitor problems, turn off your furnace and call for service rather than repeatedly attempting to restart it. Multiple failed ignition attempts can be dangerous and may damage other components. For reliable furnace repair in Ottawa, contact a TSSA-licensed technician who can safely diagnose and replace the ignitor.

Q5

How do I change my furnace filter?

Changing your furnace filter is one of the most important maintenance tasks you can do yourself, and it should be done every 1-3 months depending on the filter type and your home's conditions.

Start by **turning off your furnace** at the thermostat or the power switch near the unit - this prevents the system from running while you're working on it. Locate your filter, which is typically found in one of three places: in a slot along the return air duct near the furnace, inside the furnace cabinet itself, or behind the return air grille on your wall

or ceiling.

Remove the old filter carefully - note the direction of the airflow arrows printed on the filter frame before pulling it out. Take a photo if you're unsure, as the new filter must be installed with arrows pointing in the same direction (toward the furnace). Check the filter size printed on the frame (like 16x25x1) and purchase the same size replacement.

In Ottawa's climate, you'll likely need to change filters more frequently during heavy heating and cooling seasons. If you have pets, allergies, or live near construction, consider changing filters monthly. Standard 1-inch pleated filters work well for most homes, while thicker 4-5 inch filters last longer but require compatible furnace systems.

Slide the new filter into place with the airflow arrows pointing toward the furnace, ensure it fits snugly without gaps around the edges, then restore power to your system. Mark your calendar for the next change - a clogged filter reduces efficiency, increases energy bills, and can damage your furnace by restricting airflow.

If you're having trouble locating your filter or notice your furnace is short-cycling frequently, it may be time for a professional tune-up to ensure everything is running efficiently through Ottawa's demanding winter season.

Q6

How do I set my thermostat for maximum efficiency?

Set your thermostat to 20°C (68°F) during the day when home, and lower it by 3-4 degrees when sleeping or away for maximum efficiency. This simple adjustment can reduce your heating costs by 10-15% annually.

Programming your thermostat properly is one of the easiest ways to cut energy costs without sacrificing comfort. During Ottawa's heating season (October through April), aim for 20°C when you're home and awake, then drop to 16-17°C overnight or when away for more than 4 hours. Your furnace or heat pump works most efficiently when it's not constantly cycling on and off to maintain precise temperatures.

Avoid common thermostat mistakes that waste energy. Don't crank the temperature way up thinking it will heat faster - your system heats at the same rate regardless. Similarly, don't set it extremely low when leaving for vacation; 15°C is sufficient to prevent pipes from freezing while saving energy. If you have a heat pump, avoid large temperature swings as this can trigger the backup electric heating elements, which are much more expensive to operate.

In Ottawa's climate, a programmable or smart thermostat pays for itself quickly through energy savings. Smart thermostats can learn your schedule and adjust automatically, while also allowing remote control when your plans

change. They're particularly valuable during our variable spring and fall weather when you might switch between heating and cooling.

For optimal efficiency, also ensure your thermostat is located away from heat sources, drafts, and direct sunlight, as these can cause false readings. Keep the area around it clear, and replace batteries annually in programmable models. If your thermostat is over 10 years old or you're experiencing uneven heating, it might be time for an upgrade.

Want to discuss upgrading to a smart thermostat or optimizing your current system? Ottawa HVAC Pro can help you choose the right solution for maximum comfort and efficiency.

Q7

How do I reset my furnace?

Most furnaces can be reset using the reset button on the unit itself, but it's important to identify why it shut down before restarting it. A furnace that repeatedly needs resetting indicates an underlying problem that requires professional attention.

First, ensure it's safe to reset your furnace. Check for any gas odors around the unit - if you smell gas, leave your home immediately and call Enbridge at 1-866-763-5427. Also verify that your carbon monoxide detectors are working and haven't been triggered.

To reset your furnace, locate the reset button which is typically a red or yellow button on the furnace unit itself, often near the blower motor or on the control panel. Turn off the power to the furnace at the electrical panel first, wait 30 seconds, then turn it back on. Press and hold the reset button for a few seconds, then release it. You should hear the furnace attempt to start up.

Before resetting, check these common issues: Make sure your thermostat is set to "heat" and the temperature is set higher than the current room temperature. Check that your furnace filter isn't completely clogged - a dirty filter can cause the system to overheat and shut down. Ensure all vents in your home are open and unobstructed.

In Ottawa's climate, a furnace that won't stay running can be dangerous during winter months. If your furnace trips the reset button repeatedly, shuts down again after resetting, or if you're uncomfortable performing these steps, it's time to call a licensed HVAC technician. Common causes requiring professional repair include faulty flame sensors, blocked vents, gas supply issues, or failing safety controls.

If your furnace won't restart or keeps shutting down after resetting, don't keep trying - this could indicate a serious safety issue. For emergency furnace service in Ottawa, contact a licensed HVAC contractor who can diagnose and safely repair the problem.

Q8

How do I balance the airflow in my house?

Balancing airflow in your home involves adjusting dampers in your ductwork and ensuring proper return air circulation. This process helps eliminate hot and cold spots while improving overall comfort and energy efficiency.

Start with the basics by checking that all supply vents are fully open and unobstructed by furniture, curtains, or debris. Walk through your home and note which rooms feel too warm or too cool compared to your thermostat setting. Replace your furnace filter if it's dirty, as a clogged filter significantly restricts airflow throughout the system.

Most forced-air systems have dampers - adjustable plates inside the main trunk lines that control airflow to different zones of your home. These are typically located near the furnace where branch ducts connect to the main trunk. Look for handles or levers on the ductwork that can be turned to open or close the dampers. To balance the system, partially close dampers leading to rooms that get too much air and open dampers to rooms that don't get enough.

Make small adjustments gradually - turn dampers only 1/4 to 1/2 turn at a time, then wait a few hours to assess the change. During heating season, you may want to reduce airflow to upper floors (since heat rises) and increase it to basements and main floors. The opposite applies during cooling season. Keep in mind that closing too many vents or dampers can create pressure imbalances and strain your HVAC system.

In Ottawa's climate, proper airflow balancing is especially important during extreme temperature swings. Many homes built in the 1980s and earlier have ductwork that wasn't optimally designed for modern high-efficiency equipment. If you're still experiencing significant temperature differences after adjusting dampers, the issue might be undersized ducts, air leaks, or inadequate return air pathways.

Professional duct balancing involves measuring actual airflow with specialized equipment and may reveal issues like disconnected ducts, excessive leakage, or improperly sized equipment. If DIY adjustments don't solve the problem, or if you're uncomfortable working around your furnace area, a professional assessment can identify underlying issues and ensure your system operates safely and efficiently.

Q9

How do I clean my heat pump coils?

Heat pump coils should be cleaned carefully, with outdoor coils being a manageable DIY task while indoor coils typically require professional service. The outdoor condenser coils collect dirt, leaves, and debris that can significantly reduce your heat pump's efficiency, while the indoor evaporator coils are more delicate and harder to access.

For **outdoor coil cleaning**, start by turning off power to the unit at both the thermostat and electrical disconnect. Remove any debris like leaves, grass, or branches from around the unit, maintaining at least 2 feet of clearance. You can gently spray the coils from inside the unit outward using a garden hose with moderate pressure - avoid

high-pressure washers that can bend the delicate aluminum fins. Work from top to bottom, and be careful not to spray electrical components. If the coils are heavily soiled, you can use a soft brush or specialized coil cleaner available at HVAC supply stores.

The **indoor evaporator coils** are located in your air handler or furnace and are much more challenging to clean safely. These coils are often difficult to access without removing panels and components, and they're surrounded by electrical connections and drain pans. Improper cleaning can damage the coils, create water leaks, or affect your system's refrigerant lines. Additionally, if your heat pump hasn't been maintained regularly, the indoor coils may have mold or significant buildup that requires professional-grade cleaning solutions and equipment.

In Ottawa's climate, heat pumps work harder due to temperature extremes, making regular coil maintenance especially important for efficiency. **Professional cleaning is recommended annually** as part of comprehensive heat pump maintenance, which also includes checking refrigerant levels, testing electrical connections, and ensuring proper drainage - all critical for reliable operation during our cold winters.

For safety and warranty protection, consider having Ottawa HVAC Pro handle your heat pump maintenance. Our technicians can thoroughly clean both coil sets, inspect for potential issues, and ensure your system operates efficiently year-round.

Q10

How do I program my thermostat?

Programming your thermostat depends on the specific model you have, but most modern thermostats follow similar basic steps. Start by locating the "Program" or "Schedule" button on your thermostat, then set your desired temperatures for different times of day.

For most programmable thermostats, you'll need to set four time periods: Wake, Leave, Return, and Sleep. A typical energy-efficient schedule might be 68°F when you're home and awake, 65°F when you're away or sleeping. During summer, reverse this - set the temperature higher when you're away to save on cooling costs. Most thermostats allow you to set different schedules for weekdays and weekends.

Smart thermostats like Nest, Ecobee, or Honeywell can often be programmed through smartphone apps, making the process much easier. These models can learn your habits automatically and adjust temperatures based on occupancy. Many also offer geofencing features that adjust temperature when you leave or return home.

In Ottawa's climate, proper programming is especially important during our cold winters and humid summers. Setting your thermostat back 7-8 degrees when you're away for 8+ hours can save up to 10% on your heating and cooling bills. However, avoid extreme setbacks in winter - dropping below 60°F can make your furnace work harder to recover and may cause humidity issues.

If your thermostat is older than 10 years or difficult to program, consider upgrading to a smart model. Modern thermostats are much more user-friendly and can significantly reduce energy costs. For installation of a new programmable or smart thermostat, we offer professional installation starting around $150-$350 depending on the model and any additional wiring needed.

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Q11

How do I maintain my humidifier?

Regular humidifier maintenance is essential for healthy indoor air quality and preventing mold, bacteria, and mineral buildup that can damage your HVAC system and harm your family's health.

The maintenance routine depends on your humidifier type, but all require consistent attention during Ottawa's dry heating season. **Bypass and fan-powered humidifiers** need their water panels replaced every 1-2 months during active use, while **steam humidifiers** require monthly cleaning of the steam cylinder and annual replacement. Check your humidifier's water supply line for leaks and ensure the drain line flows freely to prevent water damage.

Monthly cleaning is crucial regardless of type. Turn off power to your furnace, remove the humidifier panel, and inspect for white mineral deposits or any signs of mold growth. Clean all surfaces with a vinegar solution (1:1 ratio with water) to dissolve mineral buildup. For steam units, the cylinder may need more frequent attention if you have hard water, which is common in many Ottawa areas. Replace any corroded or heavily scaled components immediately.

Ottawa's municipal water can be quite hard, leading to faster mineral accumulation in your humidifier. Consider having your water tested and potentially installing a water softener if you're constantly battling scale buildup. During spring shutdown, thoroughly clean and dry all components before storage to prevent mold growth over the summer months.

Never ignore unusual sounds, musty odors, or white dust around your home - these indicate your humidifier needs immediate attention. A poorly maintained humidifier can introduce harmful contaminants into your air and cause expensive damage to your furnace. If you're uncomfortable performing this maintenance or notice any gas appliance issues during inspection, contact a licensed HVAC technician.

For professional humidifier maintenance and to ensure your entire HVAC system is operating safely and efficiently, Ottawa HVAC Pro offers comprehensive annual tune-ups that include humidifier inspection and cleaning.

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Q12

How do I bleed air from my radiators?

Bleeding air from radiators is a straightforward maintenance task that can improve your heating system's efficiency. You'll need a radiator key (available at hardware stores), a cloth or towel, and a small container to catch water.

Start with your heating system turned off and radiators cool to the touch. Locate the bleed valve at the top of each radiator - it's typically a small square or hexagonal fitting. Begin with the radiators on the lowest floor of your home and work your way up, as air naturally rises through the system.

Insert the radiator key into the bleed valve and turn it counterclockwise about a quarter turn. You should hear air hissing out - this is normal. Keep the valve open until water starts to flow steadily, then immediately close it by turning clockwise. Be ready with your cloth and container, as some water will come out. The water may be discolored initially, which is normal.

After bleeding all radiators, check your boiler's pressure gauge. In Ottawa homes with hydronic heating systems, the pressure should typically read between 12-15 PSI when cold. If the pressure has dropped significantly after bleeding, you may need to add water to the system through the fill valve, though this should be done carefully to avoid overpressurization.

If you're uncomfortable with this process or notice persistent issues like radiators that won't heat evenly after bleeding, it's time to call a professional. Problems with your hydronic heating system can indicate issues with the circulator pump, expansion tank, or other components that require licensed technician attention. For complex heating system issues in Ottawa, consider having your system inspected to ensure optimal performance through our cold winters.

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Q13

How do I light my furnace pilot light?

Most modern furnaces don't have pilot lights - they use electronic ignition systems instead. If your furnace is more than 15-20 years old and does have a pilot light, this involves working with gas connections and should only be done by a licensed HVAC technician for safety reasons.

For older furnaces with pilot lights, the process typically involves turning off the gas supply, waiting for any residual gas to clear, then following a specific sequence of turning valves and using the igniter button. However, **this work requires handling gas lines and combustion systems**, which is regulated by TSSA (Technical Standards & Safety Authority) in Ontario. Only licensed G2 or G3 gas technicians are legally permitted to work on gas-burning appliances.

If your furnace won't start, the issue is likely not a pilot light. Modern furnaces have electronic ignition systems that can fail due to dirty flame sensors, faulty ignition modules, or other components. These systems are much more reliable than old pilot lights but require professional diagnosis when they malfunction.

Carbon monoxide safety is critical with any gas furnace work. Improper lighting or adjustment of gas appliances can create dangerous CO conditions. If you smell gas around your furnace, leave your home immediately and call Enbridge at 1-866-763-5427.

Your best next step is to call a licensed HVAC technician to diagnose why your furnace isn't starting. In Ottawa's winter climate, you need reliable heat, and professional service ensures your system operates safely and efficiently. For emergency furnace service in Ottawa, contact a TSSA-licensed contractor who can quickly identify and resolve the issue.

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Q14

How do I clean my furnace flame sensor?

Cleaning your furnace flame sensor is a simple maintenance task that can solve ignition problems, but safety precautions are essential when working around gas appliances.

The flame sensor is a small metal rod (usually about 4-6 inches long) located near the burner assembly that detects whether the gas is actually burning. When it gets dirty or corroded, it can't properly sense the flame, causing your furnace to shut down for safety. **Before starting any work, turn off power to your furnace at the electrical panel and turn the gas valve to "OFF."**

To clean the sensor, you'll need to remove the furnace access panel and locate the flame sensor rod near the burners. Carefully disconnect the wire connector and remove the mounting screw to pull out the sensor. **Use fine-grit sandpaper (220-grit) or steel wool to gently clean the metal rod until it's shiny.** Avoid using harsh chemicals or coarse abrasives that could damage the sensor. A clean cloth can remove any remaining residue.

In Ottawa's climate, flame sensors often get dirty from dust accumulation during our long heating season. This is typically a $200-300 service call if you hire a technician, but it's one of the few furnace maintenance tasks homeowners can safely perform themselves. However, if you're uncomfortable working around gas appliances or notice other issues like unusual sounds or smells, it's best to call a licensed HVAC technician.

After cleaning and reinstalling the sensor, turn the gas back on and restore power to test your furnace. **If the problem persists after cleaning, the sensor may need replacement or there could be other ignition system issues requiring professional diagnosis.** Remember that only TSSA-licensed technicians should perform repairs on gas-burning components beyond basic maintenance like this.

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Q15

How do I test if my thermostat is working?

A faulty thermostat is one of the most common causes of HVAC problems, but fortunately it's also one of the easiest to test. Start by checking if your system responds when you adjust the temperature setting up or down by 5 degrees from the current room temperature.

Begin with the basics - ensure your thermostat display is on and showing the correct time and temperature. If the display is blank, check if it needs new batteries or if a circuit breaker has tripped. Set your thermostat to "heat" mode and raise the temperature setting 5 degrees above the current room temperature. You should hear your furnace kick on within a few minutes. Then switch to "cool" mode and lower the setting 5 degrees below room temperature - your air conditioning should start running.

Test the fan function by switching the fan setting from "auto" to "on." The blower should start immediately and run continuously until you switch it back to "auto." If the fan runs but heating or cooling doesn't work, the issue is likely with your furnace or AC unit, not the thermostat. Also check that the thermostat is level on the wall and not affected by direct sunlight, drafts, or heat sources like lamps, which can cause false readings.

In Ottawa's climate, thermostat issues often become apparent during seasonal transitions when we switch between heating and cooling modes. If your system doesn't respond to temperature changes, makes unusual clicking sounds, or shows error codes, the thermostat may need replacement. Modern programmable and smart thermostats typically last 10-15 years, while older mechanical models may need replacement sooner.

Safety note: If your heating system doesn't respond to thermostat adjustments during winter, don't let your home get too cold as frozen pipes can cause expensive damage. **If these basic tests reveal your thermostat isn't controlling your HVAC system properly, it's time to call a licensed technician** who can determine if you need thermostat replacement or if there's an issue with your heating and cooling equipment.

For professional thermostat diagnosis and replacement in Ottawa, request a quote from Ottawa HVAC Pro - we can help determine if your thermostat needs repair or if a programmable upgrade would improve your comfort and energy efficiency.

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