What to Ask Your HVAC Contractor Before Replacing Your System

Replacing a heating and cooling system is a major decision. The equipment in your home or building works year-round, so choosing the right replacement involves more than picking a brand or comparing prices. Asking the right questions beforehand helps you understand what you are getting and what the job will actually involve. A good contractor will welcome thoughtful questions, because they show you are an informed customer who wants the work done properly.

Before any equipment is ordered or any ductwork is touched, you and the contractor should be clear on a few key things. The questions below cover sizing, efficiency, refrigerant, zoning, and what the quoted price includes. They apply whether you are replacing an old furnace, an air conditioner, or a heat pump system.

How Do You Determine the Right System Size?

Oversizing is one of the most common mistakes in system replacement. A unit that is too large will short-cycle, meaning it turns on and off frequently. That wastes energy, wears out components faster, and fails to control humidity properly in cooling mode. An undersized system runs constantly and still cannot keep up on the hottest or coldest days.

A professional contractor should perform a load calculation, not just match the size of the old unit. The calculation considers square footage, insulation levels, window type and orientation, number of occupants, and internal heat sources like appliances and lighting. Ask whether they use a standard method such as Manual J or a similar industry-approved procedure. If the contractor says they can size the system by looking at the old nameplate or by measuring the floor area alone, that is a red flag.

What SEER Rating Do You Recommend for This Application?

SEER stands for Seasonal Energy Efficiency Ratio. It measures how efficiently a cooling system operates over an entire cooling season. Higher numbers mean better efficiency. But the right SEER rating depends on your climate, how often the system runs, and your budget. In a moderate climate with relatively few cooling hours, a very high SEER unit may never pay back its premium cost. In a hot climate where the air conditioner runs seven months a year, a higher SEER rating makes more sense.

A contractor should explain the trade-off between upfront cost and long-term operating cost for your specific situation. They should also mention that federal and local efficiency standards

set a minimum SEER, so any new unit will meet at least that level. If you are replacing a heat pump or a system that provides both heating and cooling, ask about HSPF (Heating Seasonal Performance Factor) as well, which measures heating efficiency.

Which Type of Refrigerant Will the New System Use?

Refrigerant regulations have changed significantly in recent years. Older systems commonly used R-22, which is being phased out. New equipment uses R-410A or newer low-global-warming-potential refrigerants such as R-32. Each refrigerant has different pressure characteristics, so the compressor and coils are designed specifically for one type.

Ask the contractor what refrigerant the proposed system uses and whether that refrigerant will remain available for service and repairs over the expected life of the unit. Some newer refrigerants are already being adopted internationally, while others may have limited availability in your region. A contractor who keeps up with industry changes should be able to explain the options clearly.

Will the Replacement Include New Ductwork or Refrigerant Lines?

In many replacement jobs, the contractor installs only the indoor and outdoor units and connects them to the existing ductwork and line set. That approach saves money, but it only works if the existing components are in good condition. Old ductwork may be undersized, leaky, or contaminated with mold or debris. Old refrigerant lines may be the wrong diameter for the new system or may contain residual oil that is not compatible with the new refrigerant.

A thorough contractor will inspect the existing ductwork and lines before giving you a firm quote. If they find problems, they should explain what needs to be changed and why. Ask whether the quoted price covers potential modifications to the ductwork or line set, or whether those would be billed as extras. Knowing this upfront prevents surprise charges after the job starts.

Techvac 505 Air Conditioning, an HVAC contractor serving Albuquerque, New Mexico, handles both heating and cooling installation and service. Contractors in similar climates often deal with a mix of equipment types, so asking about their experience with your specific system configuration is worthwhile.

How Will You Handle the Electrical and Gas Connections?

A system replacement may require electrical upgrades. Older homes sometimes have service panels or wiring that cannot handle the load of a modern unit. The contractor should check the existing electrical service, the disconnect switch, and the breaker size. If a new circuit is needed, that adds cost and may require a permit and an electrician.

For gas-fired furnaces, the contractor should verify the gas line size and pressure. An undersized gas line can cause poor combustion or sooting. The contractor should also check the venting system. Many older furnaces used a natural-draft chimney that may not be compatible with a high-efficiency condensing furnace, which requires a dedicated PVC or stainless steel vent. Ask whether the quote includes any necessary venting changes.

What Zoning Options Are Available?

If your home or building has multiple floors or areas with different heating and cooling needs, a single system may not keep everyone comfortable. Zoning allows you to control different areas independently. With a forced-air system, zoning is done with motorized dampers in the ductwork and a separate thermostat for each zone. With ductless mini-splits, each indoor unit serves its own zone.

Ask the contractor whether zoning is practical for your layout and budget. If you are replacing a system that already has zoning, confirm that the new equipment can support the same number of zones or more. If you are adding zoning for the first time, the contractor should explain the additional cost and the expected comfort improvement.

What Is Included in the Warranty, and Who Provides Service?

Equipment warranties vary by manufacturer and by model. Some warranties cover the compressor and major components for ten years, while others cover parts only for five years. Labor is typically not included unless you purchase an extended labor warranty. Ask the contractor what the manufacturer warranty covers and what it excludes. Also ask what the contractor offers as a labor warranty on their installation work.

Find out who to call if something goes wrong. If the installing contractor is also the service provider, you have one point of contact. If the contractor is primarily an installer and does not offer ongoing service, you may need to find a separate company for repairs. Clarify this before you sign the contract. A contractor like Techvac 505 Air Conditioning, which provides both installation and service, can often respond faster because they are familiar with the equipment they installed.

What Permits and Inspections Are Required?

Most jurisdictions require a permit for a system replacement, especially when ductwork, refrigerant lines, or electrical connections are involved. A permit ensures that the work is inspected for safety and code compliance. Some contractors include the permit fee in their quote; others leave it as an extra. Ask directly whether the permit is included and who will schedule the inspection.

Skipping the permit may save a small amount of money, but it creates risk. If the work is not inspected, you may have trouble selling the home later, and an insurance claim related to the system could be denied. A reputable contractor will pull permits as a matter of routine.

How Will the Old System Be Removed and Disposed Of?

Old equipment contains refrigerant, oil, and sometimes hazardous materials. Proper removal and disposal are regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency. The contractor must recover the refrigerant, not vent it to the atmosphere. They should also recycle or dispose of the old unit according to local rules.

Ask whether removal and disposal are included in the quoted price. Some contractors charge a separate fee for hauling away the old equipment. If the old system is large or located in a difficult space, removal may take extra time. Getting this in writing avoids confusion later.

Getting a Written Proposal

Once you have asked these questions, ask for a detailed written proposal. It should list the equipment model numbers, the SEER or efficiency ratings, the scope of work, the warranty terms, the permit status, and the total price. A vague one-page quote is not enough. A thorough proposal shows that the contractor has thought through the job and is willing to stand behind their work.

Take your time comparing proposals from two or three contractors if possible. The lowest price is not always the best value, especially if it excludes important items like duct modifications or electrical upgrades. Look for a contractor who answers your questions clearly and provides a complete, itemized proposal. That approach reduces the chance of misunderstandings and helps ensure that your new system performs well for years to come.