A Seasonal Guide to Keeping Your Central Heating in Good Shape

Central heating does its job quietly for months, and it is easy to take for granted until something goes wrong. A little attention at the right time can save you from a cold house and an unexpected call to a repair service. A seasonal approach spreads the work across the year and catches small problems before they turn into big ones.

Early autumn: prepare before the cold arrives

Autumn is the best time to check your heating system before you rely on it every day. The days are still mild, so if something needs fixing you have time to arrange it without rushing.

Start by turning the heating on for a short while. Listen for unusual noises from the boiler or the radiators. Banging, gurgling or whining sounds often mean air in the system or a part that is struggling. If the boiler fires up then cuts out again, the pressure may be too low or the condensate pipe could be blocked. Let the system run for about fifteen minutes and check that every radiator gets warm. A radiator that stays cold at the top usually needs bleeding. One that stays cold all over may have a stuck valve or a sludge blockage.

Check the boiler pressure gauge while the system is cold. Most boilers work well between 1 and 1.5 bar. If the pressure is below 1 bar, you can top it up using the filling loop. The manual for your boiler will show you how. If the pressure keeps dropping, there may be a leak somewhere in the pipework or a faulty expansion vessel. That is a job for a Gas Safe engineer.

View the location on Google Maps

Look at the condensate pipe that carries waste water from a condensing boiler to an outside drain. In autumn, leaves and debris can block the outlet. A blocked condensate pipe makes the boiler shut down. Clear the pipe end by hand if it is safe to reach, or ask a heating engineer to do it.

Test your thermostat and heating controls. Turn the heating up a few degrees and listen for the boiler firing. Then turn it down and confirm the boiler stops. If the room thermostat is old or inaccurate, the boiler may run longer than needed. A programmable thermostat or smart heating control can make the system more responsive and save energy over the winter.

Winter: keep an eye on performance

Once winter comes, the system runs hard. The main tasks are to monitor what it does and to notice changes quickly.

Check the boiler pressure once a week. It can drop slightly over time. If it goes below 1 bar, repressurise it. If it keeps falling, a slow leak is likely. A persistent pressure loss should be investigated by a professional, because even a small leak can cause damage to floors or ceilings.

Feel the radiators regularly. A radiator that goes cold in the middle while the top and bottom stay warm may have trapped air. Bleed it with a radiator key, but only when the system is off and the radiator is cool. If sludge is the problem, the radiator may need a power flush. That is a bigger job and best done by a heating engineer.

Frozen condensate pipes are a common winter problem. If the outside temperature drops below freezing, the water in the pipe can freeze and block it. The boiler will then lock out and stop working. You can insulate the exposed part of the pipe with foam lagging to reduce the risk. If it does freeze, pour warm (not boiling) water over the pipe to thaw it. If the pipe is not easily reached, call an engineer.

Listen for the boiler cycling on and off too often. If it fires up for a few minutes then stops, even when the house is still cold, the heat exchanger may be scaled or the system may be losing heat somewhere. Frequent cycling wastes energy and puts extra wear on the parts. A Gas Safe engineer can check the boiler settings and clean the heat exchanger if needed.

Spring: give the system a rest and check for wear

When the weather warms up, the boiler works less. That is a good time to do checks that are harder in winter.

Turn the heating off and leave the system idle for a day. Then turn it back on briefly and watch how it behaves. If it takes a long time to get going or makes noises it did not make before, a part may have seized or a valve may be sticking. Moving parts that sit unused for months can stiffen. Exercising the system once a month even in summer helps keep everything free.

Look at the area around the boiler. Any signs of water, rust or staining on the floor or the casing suggest a slow leak or condensation inside the boiler. A small leak now can become a bigger problem later. Have an engineer inspect it.

Check the pressure relief valve pipe that runs outside. If water drips from it, the valve may be letting by or the system pressure may be too high. A small amount of dripping can be normal on a hot day, but continuous dripping needs attention.

If you have a condensing boiler, check the condensate pipe again. Spring growth of plants and moss near the outlet can block it. Keep the area clear.

Consider whether the heating controls are still right for your home. An old mechanical timer or thermostat may not match how you live now. Upgrading to a modern programmer or a smart thermostat can make the system easier to manage. This is also a good time to think about whether the boiler itself is getting old. A boiler over fifteen years old may be less efficient and more likely to break down. If you are thinking about a replacement, spring gives you time to plan and arrange it before the next winter.

Summer: the quiet season for maintenance

Summer is the best time for work that takes the system out of action. You will not miss the heating, and engineers are usually less busy than in autumn and winter.

If you have not had the boiler serviced in the past twelve months, book a service now. A Gas Safe engineer will check the flue, the burner, the heat exchanger and the safety devices. They will clean the internal parts and test for gas tightness. A proper service keeps the boiler running safely and efficiently. It also picks up problems that would otherwise appear in winter.

Bleed the radiators even if they seem fine. Air can collect in the system over time, and bleeding in summer means the radiators will be ready when you turn the heating on in autumn. If the water that comes out during bleeding is dark or rusty, the system may have sludge. A power flush every five to ten years removes sludge and improves efficiency.

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Check the insulation on pipes in unheated spaces like lofts, garages and underfloor voids. Poorly insulated pipes lose heat and can freeze in winter. Add or replace insulation where it has gone missing or been damaged.

If you are planning any building work, summer is a good time to think about changes to the heating system. Moving a radiator, adding underfloor heating or replacing an old boiler all need careful planning. A company that offers boiler installation services can advise on the best setup for your home. For homes in the Camberley and Berkshire area, Carswells Construction provides professional plumbing and heating work, including boiler installation and system upgrades. Their team includes a Gas Safe Registered engineer who can carry out gas-related work safely.

When to call a professional

Many of the checks described here are simple and safe to do yourself. Bleeding a radiator, topping up boiler pressure and clearing a condensate pipe outlet are tasks that need no special tools and carry no risk if done with the system off and cold. Anything that involves gas, mains

electricity, opening the boiler casing or working on sealed pipework should be left to a qualified engineer. A Gas Safe engineer is legally required for work on gas appliances in the UK.

Signs that you need professional help include a persistent pressure drop, a boiler that locks out repeatedly, a gas smell, or radiators that stay cold despite bleeding. If you smell gas, turn off the gas supply at the meter if it is safe to do so, open windows, do not use any electrical switches or flames, leave the building and call the gas emergency number or a qualified gas technician from outside. Do not wait for the smell to clear.

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