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How to Read Your HVAC System Before It Breaks: A Seasonal Maintenance Walkthrough

Our Friends · Wednesday, October 14th, 2026

Most HVAC breakdowns announce themselves weeks before they happen. You just have to know which rooms to stand in and what to listen for. I learned this the expensive way, after a capacitor failed on a 95 degree Friday in July and my family spent two nights rotating between a basement couch and a motel with a wobbly ice machine. Here is the short version of what I wish someone had told me then: your system gives you three signals before it quits, and all three show up in ordinary moments. Airflow at the vents. Sound at the outdoor unit. And condensation, either where it belongs or where it absolutely does not.

Catch any one of those early and you are scheduling a repair on your terms, not begging for **reliable HVAC service in Sandusky** on a holiday weekend. So this is a walkthrough, not a lecture. Twenty minutes, twice a year, moving through your house the way heat and refrigerant actually move. Do that and you will spot most of what a technician would spot on an arrival visit, minus the gauges. The goal is simple: new hvac service sandusky customers usually call for emergency no cooling, and almost every one of those calls started as a signal the homeowner noticed and shrugged off.

Start Where the Air Starts: Your Filter and Return Vents

Before you touch the thermostat, go find every return grille in the house. Most homes have one big return, some have two, and a surprising number have a return the previous owner drywalled over because it looked better that way. That last situation quietly starves your blower and shortens the life of the motor.

Pull the filter and hold it up to a window. If you cannot see daylight through the media, it is loaded. Here's the part people get wrong: a filter's job is to protect the equipment, not to sterilize your air, and the thickest filter on the shelf can actually choke a system that was designed for a thinner one. I would rather you run a mid-grade pleated filter and change it on schedule than buy the hospital-grade panel and replace it twice a year because it costs forty dollars.

While you are down there, run your hand along the duct seam closest to the air handler. Felted dust along a joint means a leak pulling attic or crawlspace air into your supply. That is comfort you are paying for and never receiving.

- Filter: swap every 60 to 90 days, monthly if you have pets or you are running the fan

continuously.

- Returns: make sure no furniture, rug, or curtain sits within a foot of the grille.
- Duct seams near the unit: check for dust lines and disconnected flex.
- Register airflow: hold a tissue to each supply vent and confirm it flutters with the blower on.

Why Does the Outdoor Unit Sound Different in August?

Stand near the condenser for a full minute with the AC running. You are listening for two things: a steady hum and a fan that moves air without a wobble. A clicking that repeats every few seconds is usually a start component on its way out. A hiss or a bubbling sound points to refrigerant, and that is a call, not a wait-and-see.

Then look down. According to the [U.S. Department of Energy](#), a dirty or blocked condenser coil makes the compressor work harder, which shows up on your electric bill before it shows up as a breakdown. Clear grass clippings, dryer lint, and the cottonwood fluff that piles up against the fins. I use a garden hose on a gentle setting, never a pressure washer, because bending those fins flat is a self-inflicted wound. Give the unit two feet of clearance on all sides. Shrubs planted for curb appeal are the most common reason I see a condenser running hot, and trimming them back is free.

The Furnace Test You Can Run in September

Do this before the first cold night, not during it. Close the windows, set the thermostat five degrees above room temperature, and let the furnace run a full cycle from start to finish. You want to hear the sequence: inducer motor, ignition, flame, then the blower kicking on about a minute later.

Put your hand near a supply register and confirm the air is warm within a couple of minutes, not lukewarm for ten. Then walk to the furnace and look for a small PVC pipe running to a floor drain or a condensate pump. High-efficiency furnaces make water, and when that drain clogs, the system shuts itself off on a safety switch. Clearing a slimy condensate trap with warm water is one of the cheapest preventive tasks in your house. If you smell anything like rotten eggs near the furnace, stop, leave the area, and call your gas provider from outside. That is the one signal on this list you never troubleshoot yourself.

A Maintenance Calendar That Actually Fits Real Life

Forget the twelve-month spreadsheet. Tie the work to events you already notice. When you swap the clocks or the smoke detector batteries, change the filter. When you first wear a jacket, run the furnace cycle. When you first run the AC, hose off the condenser. That is four touchpoints a year and it beats any reminder app I have tried.

When	What you do	What it prevents
Spring, before first AC use	Rinse condenser coil, clear two feet of clearance, swap filter	High head pressure, compressor strain
Mid summer	Check condensate drain line and pan, sniff for musty air	Water damage, mold in the plenum
Early fall	Run a full furnace cycle, test the thermostat batteries	No heat on the first freezing night
Before winter	Clear the condensate trap, check the flue for obstructions	Safety lockouts, carbon monoxide risk

I would add one more item that nobody lists: write the install date of your equipment on a piece of tape inside the furnace door. When a technician opens it, they know instantly whether you are shopping for a repair or planning a replacement. It also stops the awkward conversation where everyone guesses.

One more check worth doing on a windy day. According to the [Air Conditioning Contractors of America](#), correct system sizing and duct design are determined by a room-by-room load calculation, which is why a bigger unit is not automatically a better one. The practical takeaway for you is simpler: if one room is always hot and another always cold, your problem is probably distribution, and no amount of new equipment fixes that by itself.

When to Watch, When to Book

Watch it if the system still heats and cools, the sounds are steady, and your energy use tracks with the weather. Book a visit if you see any of these: ice on the refrigerant lines, a furnace that short cycles every few minutes, water under the air handler, a burning smell at the vents, or a filter that clogs in under a month. Those are not personality quirks of an old system. They are the last signals before a failure.

The twenty minutes you spend on this walkthrough twice a year is the cheapest insurance in your house. Set a reminder for the next season change, grab a flashlight and a fresh filter, and start with the returns. What did your last walkthrough turn up?

Photo: Richard Low Hong via Pexels

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