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**Scam Alert: Avoid “dirty” duct cleaners**

**The scenario:** You get a flyer in the mail from a company offering to clean the air ducts at your home for only \$99. Intrigued by the low price, you contact the company and set up an appointment.

When the company arrives at your house, the rep tries to sell you on a bunch of other services, including carpet cleaning or mold remediation, to improve the air quality inside your home. If you don't bite at these invoice-increasing items, he gives your ducts a cursory cleaning before moving on to the next mark somewhere in your area.

That lowball offer should have been a red flag to avoid that firm. A reputable company will charge \$400 to \$1,000 to clean the ducts in a typical 2,000-square-foot house, says the National Air Duct Cleaners Association (NADCA). A quality job should take two pros, who'll use specialized tools, about 8 to 15 hours to complete.

Even more important to know is that there's no proof that cleaning ducts prevents health problems, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Nor do studies conclusively show that dirty ducts increase levels of airborne particulates in a home. Still, there are times when you should get your ducts cleaned:

- Have the ductwork cleaned if it contains visible mold buildup or has debris coming out of supply registers, or if the ducts are infested with vermin. Check for problems by removing the registers and shining a flashlight into the ductwork.
- Consider having your ductwork professionally inspected if someone in your home is suffering from unexplained allergies or illness. Before you do that, however, a doctor should rule out other causes.

To find a reputable duct cleaner, get referrals from the company that services your furnace. You'll also find NADCA member contractors in your area on the association's Web site. Before you sign a contract, ask for evidence of contamination, including a lab report if mold is a concern. And be sure the company cleans the entire HVAC system, including the ducts, heat exchanger, and air handler.

After the work has been completed, insist on a thorough visual inspection—all components of the HVAC system should be free of visible dust and debris. A top-shelf pro might even use remote photography to show you the clean ducts.

**Essential information:** Read “Filtering the Claims” for information on air purifiers.

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