

Is Duct Cleaning the Solution?

Americans spend over \$16 billion a year on indoor air quality to help improve their health. But, are dirty air-conditioning ducts really the reason for those nagging coughs?

Trap

Nick and Nora Brown were frazzled. Their kids had been coughing and sneezing and unable to sleep through the night. Visits to the family doctor had been inconclusive. A friend suggested having all the rugs in the house professionally cleaned. Nora even washed all the kid's stuffed animals, but the problem persisted.

Nora was at a loss as to what was causing the problem. She saw an advertisement for duct cleaning that claimed major health benefits. She decided to call and arranged to have a technician inspect her home after she was told they were running a \$100 limited time special offer.

Ed, from "Dirt and Dust Away", was sure his company could provide the solution. At the inspection, Ed made a long list of things that needed to be done including special treatments. The cost was over \$1,000! Nick and Nora questioned Ed about the advertised "special offer" and were told that since there were multiple ducts, each one needed separate treatments to ensure the problem was resolved. The Browns were feeling uncomfortable but Ed promised that if he cleaned the ducts, installed an ultraviolet light and a new special filter, the kids would never cough or sneeze again. Desperate for relief, the Browns signed the work order and credit card receipt.

The work took less time than the Browns expected, and days later the children were still coughing and sneezing. Nick took out the copy of the work order and called the company to complain. He asked to speak with the manager who agreed to come right over. Nick was assured that if the job didn't meet his satisfaction, it would be redone. Although appointments were made, they were always cancelled at the last minute. Nick decided a strongly worded letter was necessary, but when he looked at the advertisement and work order, there was no address for the business. They called their credit card company to dispute the charge and were advised since they signed the work order and credit card receipt, little could be done.

Tips

Here are some tips to consider before hiring a duct cleaning company:

- Ask your doctor if it is possible to determine the cause of the symptoms your family is experiencing. If the cause is related to indoor air quality, consider consulting a specialist who deals with allergies and respiratory concerns.
- As it is possible contaminants could be entering the home through leaks in the ductwork, contact Florida Power and Light (<http://www.fpl.com>) to schedule an FPL Energy Expert to perform an affordable duct system test to determine if your ducts are sealed properly or if repairs need to be made.
- A license is required for contractors who provide duct cleaning services. Check with the Florida Department of Business & Professional Regulation (850-487-1395, <http://www.myfloridalicense.com>) to determine if the business has an active license or Palm Beach County Contractor's Certification (561-233-5525, <http://www.pbcgov.com/pzb/contractors>) for more information.
- Be wary of businesses that want to clean ducts without inspecting them first and/or offer services at a very low price without providing details as to what the price covers. Review the work order. Is the address for the business pre-printed on the form? Verify that the address provided is the physical address and not just the mailing address.
- According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), there is no scientific evidence that duct cleaning by itself improves air quality or prevents health problems. However, the EPA does recommend duct cleaning when mold is visible or the ducts are clogged with dust that can be released into the home.
- Many homes in south Florida have insulated fiber or flex ducts which should not be cleaned aggressively. Doing so will loosen the fiberglass and send fibers through the house. If you are uncertain as to what type of ductwork you have, consider consulting a cooling or heating professional.
- Are the workers experienced? An untrained worker can damage your home. Get estimates from 3 or more companies to compare the costs and services to be provided. If you feel pressured to buy additional services, sign the work order or make a quick decision, find another company.

**For more information, call Palm Beach County Consumer Affairs at
561-712-6600 (Boca/Delray 888-852-7362 toll free)**