

Life expectancy of household appliances

When is a good time to replace a major appliance? If you wait until it breaks, you are losing money on service calls, utility bills, and missing out on low sale prices. The following is a rundown of the average life expectancy of some common household appliances to help you mitigate the costs of maintenance and repair, and determine when it's more cost-effective to replace a unit entirely.

Refrigerators

Household appliance expert Joe Gagnon (also known as "The Appliance Doctor") says that, with the exception of one high-end brand, the average life expectancy of today's refrigerator is 12 to 14 years, regardless of the chrome, color, and features that drive the price tag higher. Before you're wooed by modern features like water dispensers that "sense" when your bottle is almost full, consider that more bells and whistles means more potential costs to keep the unit in working condition.

"Electronic mother boards [that power "smart" features] greatly increase the cost of repairs, because they can range from \$300 to \$500 to replace," says Gagnon. To get the most out of your refrigerator, clean the condenser coils (located on the bottom, top, or back of the refrigerator, depending on the model) with your vacuum cleaner hose at least every six months. In addition to increasing the efficacy of your refrigerator, Gagnon says it may shave off about \$10 a month from your electric bill.

Dishwashers

Gagnon says a new dishwasher will typically last about 12 years, but again, more features (like built-in garbage disposals) can mean you'll pay for more service calls (which tend to start at \$75+) because hard pieces of food tend to get lodged in the unit. And don't assume that a pricier brand means cleaner dishes; much of the outcome has to do with your approach to dishwashing.

"Use powdered detergent that's kept in a sealed container away from humidity," suggests

Gagnon—in most homes, this means NOT under the kitchen sink. If your dishwasher doesn't have a built-in heat feature, he says to run the kitchen faucet for a few seconds before starting the cycle to ensure that it begins with hot water.

Microwaves

Most microwaves have a 10- to 12-year life expectancy, but Gagnon says frequent cleaning of the microwave's walls and ceilings is your greatest defense in maintaining its longevity. Because microwaves are now so widely available and inexpensive, prices vary greatly by retailer.

Hot Water Tanks

Though the life expectancy of a hot water tank is about 7 to 10 years, Gagnon says that draining 5 to 10 gallons of water from the tank at the bottom of the unit every few months will keep the unit working efficiently. "If you don't do this," he cautions, "the minerals that are in the water form a rock that can be as thick as six inches. When the flame comes on underneath to heat the water, it has to heat the rock first."

Washer/Dryer

The average washing machine lasts about 10 years, the average dryer about 15+. Yet the popular front-load washing machines (which can cost \$500 more than top-loading units) are one of the primary reasons Gagnon receives hundreds of consumer-complaint emails each week: "They're being complained about by millions of consumers for odor and mold problems," he says, "and manufacturers haven't really fixed the problem."

If you've decided that it's time to replace one of your household appliances, January is one of the best times to shop, since many retailers discount older models to make room for new inventory. Another tip: Consider using a credit card that offers ways to help you get money back on major purchases.

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