More than a billion major and portable appliances are in use in American homes. These mechanical servants offer previously undreamed freedom from household drudgery. In order to receive maximum efficiency however, one must know how to select, use and care for appliances.

**Appliance Selection**

Major home appliance purchases are among the largest, most important investments made for the home. To get the greatest return for dollars spent, consider many factors when planning to buy any major home appliance.

*Need.* The first questions to ask are: Is the appliance needed? Why? Will it be used primarily for convenience, to perform a specific job or because the family has a special need? Recognize the motives for buying.

There may be special needs to consider. For example, switches and controls may need to be located out of the reach of children or within easy reach for wheelchair users. Match the size or capacity of appliances to needs; for example, consider the need for a double oven or a large freezer based on expected use.

*Use.* How will the appliance be used throughout its life span? Will needs and requirements change with future family or home size? A family who moves frequently may want portable appliances rather than conventional built-in models.

*Space and installation.* Know how much space is available for the appliance. Will it fit through the doors or up the stairs in your house? Will remodeling be necessary to build in a dishwasher or vent a clothes dryer or add a drain connection for an icemaker? Are there adequate grounded outlets or a separate circuit if needed? Have the installer, electrician or plumber check household wiring, gas lines and water lines for adequacy and safety. Ask about installation or delivery charges.

*Prices.* The highest price tag does not necessarily indicate the best buy. One way you can decide between appliances is to compare life cycle costs. Life cycle costs include the original purchase price plus costs of service or maintenance and costs of operation. For many appliances, operation costs over the lifetime of the appliance may amount to more than the original price. To figure life cycle costs, look for a label on the appliance telling the estimated annual energy cost of operation. Use the chart in this publication entitled "Service Life Expectancies" to find the normal number of years the product will last or the number of years which it will be kept. Multiply these two figures for the estimated life cycle costs. Then you can compare appliances more easily.

*Safety.* Check for rough edges or sharp points. Be certain that electrical appliances have the Underwriter’s Laboratories seal and that gas appliances have the American Gas Association seal, certifying that they have met rigid safety standards.

*Warranties.* How long does the warranty last on the entire product? What is the length of the limited warranty on individual parts? Is the cost of labor included in the warranty? What is the policy of the dealer or the
warranty for paying the cost of returning appliances for warranty service? Keep all warranties in one safe place where they can be found. At the time of purchase, complete and mail the registration card that usually comes with the warranty. This card provides proof of date of purchase.

Ease of Care. Look for appliance design, materials and finishes that facilitate easy care and cleaning. Check for materials that do not stain or absorb odors. Look for designs that do not collect dirt and do allow easy access for cleaning.

Appliance Use

In order to receive all benefits the appliance was designed to give, read the instruction manual before you operate an appliance. Be sure that every family member who uses the appliance knows how to use all features properly and efficiently.

For the safe use of all appliances follow these suggestions.

• Check the appliance’s wattage and the capacity of home electrical circuits. Avoid putting more than one heating or two motor-driven appliances on one circuit. Use grounded outlets for all major appliances.
• Replace cords having worn or cracked insulation. Never run cords over hot objects; excessive heat could melt the insulation or make it dry and brittle.
• Never run cords under a rug or a door.
• Avoid the use of an extension cord for connecting a major appliance.
• Allow space around refrigerators, freezers and microwave appliances for the air circulation needed to cool some operating parts. Allow space between heating and cooling appliances to keep cooling appliances from over-working.
• Locate appliances where they can be operated most efficiently. For example, locate the dishwasher and laundry equipment near the hot water heater. Avoid placing the refrigerator or freezer in the direct path of cooling or heating vents.
• Never handle an electrical appliance with wet hands or when standing on a wet surface. Avoid touching an appliance and a radiator, faucet or sink at the same time.

Appliance Care

Basic instructions are found in the use and care booklet that comes with the appliance. Study this booklet for advice on routine care procedures, what cleaning products or utensils to use, and any special details about care. For example, the booklet will tell you if your dishwasher has a food trap that periodically needs cleaning or if your self defrosting freezer has a drip pan that needs emptying. By reading the booklet, you don’t have to wait for odors to alert you of such special features.

If problems develop and your appliance is suddenly making a strange noise or no noise at all, what do you do? Resist the first impulse to call for professional service immediately. National statistics indicate that half of all service calls are totally unnecessary; a machine may be protesting improper usage. To save yourself time, money, effort and frustration, do some routine checking.

• Check the instruction manual and repeat each step of operation. One step may have been overlooked.
• Check the off-on controls or the pilot light.
• Make sure the cord is plugged in completely.

MAKE SURE PLUG IS IN OUTLET AND NOT LOOSE

• Check fuses and circuit breakers for a blown or loose fuse or an open circuit breaker.

CHECK FUSES and CIRCUIT BREAKERS

• Check the outlet for power by plugging in a small lamp or other appliance.

CHECK THE OUTLET FOR POWER

Other appliance fact sheets available from your county Extension agent give specific points to check for each appliance.
There may come a time when you’ve tried all the easy solutions and problems still exist. What do you do?

If you want to fix it yourself...

- First consult your warranty. If it remains in force, you could render it void by working on the appliance yourself. In this case, let the dealer or the manufacturer perform the repairs.
- Be systematic. Read all the information available in the use and care booklet. Consult any references you may have, such as those listed at the end of this publication.
- Relax. Avoid rushing into the repairs. Take the safety precautions of shutting off electricity to the appliance, or turn off the water at the appropriate valve.
- Diagnose the probable source of trouble and plan your remedy. Get any tools you may need.
- Study the assembly before dismantling anything. Carefully keep track of all parts, in the order you remove them.
- Recognize your limitations. You may not be able to solve all problems without professional help.

If you need a service person...

- Select with care. Choose one that is listed in your owner’s manual as an authorized service center if the work is to be covered by the manufacturer’s warranty. Otherwise, ask the dealer or your friends for recommendations.
- Ask for a written estimate of the cost before work begins. Require that your permission be obtained before proceeding if work exceeds the estimate. Get an itemized bill of all parts and labor charges when the work is completed.
- Be reasonable and fair and expect the same in return. Plan to be home until the service person arrives.

If problems persist...

- Write or call the manufacturer giving all details of the problem. Give the model and serial number of your appliance, the retailer’s name and address and the name and address of any service center you used.
- If you are not satisfied with the action taken by the manufacturer, write or call the Major Appliance Consumer Action Panel (MACAP), 20 North Wacker Drive, Chicago, Illinois 60606, Telephone 312-236-3165. State what recourse was sought from the dealer, service center and the manufacturer. MACAP will not handle the problem unless you have tried these sources.

Service Contracts

Many manufacturers, dealers and service centers offer service contracts for appliances. For a yearly fee, a company issues a service contract providing you with insurance against big bills. If the appliance turns out to be a “lemon” you could save quite a bit. However, if repair bills are normal, you may spend more on a service contract than you would on repairs.

Before you sign up for a service contract, consider the following points:

- the service life expectancy of the appliance
- your own ability to maintain or repair the appliance
- the product warranty
- how large a repair bill you could handle

Service contracts are not standardized, and generally their terms depend on the appliance involved. Read before you sign and know exactly what you’re paying for, as well as how much you’re paying. If you could deposit the annual cost of a service contract in a savings account — and earn interest — you would have a fund to help handle any repair bills.

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References


The following Extension fact sheets discuss selection, use and care of specific appliances.

L-1168 Refrigerators and Freezers
L-1179 Decisions about Dishwashers
L-1180 Washers
L-1181 Dryers
L-1182 Disposers and Compacters
L-1240 Ranges
L-1241 Microwave Appliances

These are available from your county Extension office.

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