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Subject: 11 Tips for Properly Insulating Attics

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ebuild

Special Report: ATTIC INSULATION

Brought to you by the editors of BUILDING PRODUCTS magazine



11 Tips for Properly Insulating Attics

The more you know about insulation, the more comfortable you can make your clients' homes.

The more you know about attic insulation, the more money you can save your homeowner-clients who complain that their houses are too hot or too cold.

In fact, most people assume that an uncomfortable indoor temperature and a soaring energy bill are symptoms of a faulty HVAC system. But the reason the a/c kicks on too often might be an insulation failure in the attic.

Re-attaching or adding insulation could save your clients from replacing the HVAC.

In fact, contractors who are familiar with the systems approach to building science realize that changing one thing in a building almost always has consequences that affect another.

Checking for properly installed attic situation, building science experts advise, is a good first stop before recommending that homeowners buy a higher-efficiency air conditioning unit, solar panels, or even better windows. Resolving a failure can restore the attic insulation's effectiveness as a barrier that prevents air from leaking indoors

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through tiny holes and crevices in the home's envelope.

Here are 11 ways to help homeowners get their money's worth from their attic insulation.

1. Many homes have plenty of insulation, but it could be poorly installed or knocked out of place. Reattaching it to the floors, ceilings, and walls it's meant to protect could save your client a bundle of money—both on replacement product and on

energy bills. For insulation to do its job, it must touch a hard surface like drywall or wood.

2. Many electric utilities around the country are participating in the federal government's Home Performance with Energy Star program, and are offering to pay most of the tab for a "home performance" professional to check dwellings for problems that could be wasting energy. The lion's share of recommended repairs involve sealing leaky air-conditioning ducts; replacing or fixing failing attic insulation; and solving the causes of air-flow restrictions, which can range from replacing undersized ductwork to changing a dirty a/c filter. To learn how to qualify as a contractor for Home Performance with Energy Star, visit www.EnergyStar.gov.

3. If you're not an energy specialist and your client wants you to help upgrade the home's energy efficiency, it could be worth hiring an efficiency expert to test for leaks—in air conditioning ducts, windows, walls, the attic. The tech will use a blower, a computer, and other equipment to test how "tight" the home's envelope is and recommend repairs and upgrades. Replacing failed insulation is likely to top the list.

4. Homeowners tend to believe that insulation lasts forever, but it doesn't. An older home that once had four or five inches of attic insulation might only have one or two left. A 15-year-old home might have enough insulation to comply with the building code of that time, but not with today's stricter code, which calls for thicker insulation. And a 50-year-old home might not have any at all if the builder relied on shading and wall ventilation rather than insulation to keep it cool.



5. Don't assume the home's insulation is installed correctly. Insulation that is

stuffed into cavities in the framing, hung near a leak or simply draped over one won't perform properly. Instead, the insulation must touch the surface it's meant to protect. If it doesn't, it will filter the hot air as it comes into the house, but it won't keep it out. And insulation with gaps in it will let heat in between those gaps.

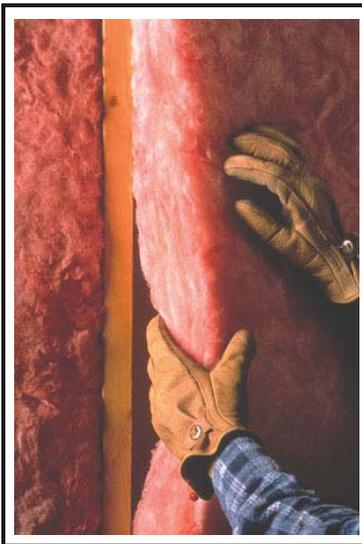
6. Don't assume the home you're working on has any insulation. For example, lots of older Sun Belt homes don't have any, and many have too little.



7. A well-insulated attic will stop the hot summer air that collects up there from infiltrating an otherwise comfortable, air-conditioned home. Depending on the region you're working in, aim for R-30 to R-38 in the ceiling.

8. It's possible to over-insulate an attic. While it's true that the greater the R-value, the greater the insulating power, a product with an R-value that's too high can reach a point of diminishing returns--and actually make an attic hotter. So if the recommended R-value for attic insulation in your region is R-38, installing insulation to achieve R-60 is overkill.

9. Be wary of unscrupulous sales reps who try to sell you or your client more insulation than is needed. Their pitch: They say installing several products that do the same thing is better than using just one. They often propose a combination of unnecessarily thick insulation, plus ventilation, plus a spray-on radiant barrier for the attic. All an attic needs is properly engineered ventilation and an adequate level of insulation.



10. Read the fine print before settling on an insulating product. The Federal Trade Commission has ruled against manufacturers who claim their radiant barriers or insulation will insulate an attic to a high R-value, when in fact, those products can't achieve that on their own. In most cases, the FTC found that the high R-value can be achieved only through a combination of insulation, radiant barriers, and common building products like gypsum board and siding, which have some insulating properties. Before you buy or recommend a product to your client, verify that the R-value claim pertains to the product on its own—and that you don't have to buy additional

products to keep the attic as cool as the sales pitch says.

11. Until the end of 2011, homeowners can take a tax credit of 10% of the cost of insulation, up to \$500. The credit covers bulk insulation products like batts, rolls, blow-in fibers, rigid boards, expanding spray, and pour-in-place. It also includes products that air seal, like weather stripping, housewrap, and some spray foams and caulks. The credit does not apply to installation costs.

—Sharon O'Malley is a contributing editor to *Building Products* magazine and *ebuild.com*

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