



10 Questions to Ask Before Hiring an Air Duct Cleaning Company

1. How are your prices determined—do you charge a flat rate or per vent?

There are a variety of fee structures associated with air duct cleaning. Obviously you wouldn't expect to pay the same amount to have the air ducts on a 5000 square-foot home cleaned as you would for a home of 1000 sq. ft. The larger the home, the more air ducts (or vents), and thus more labor involved for the technician. Some companies charge a flat rate for a particular number of vents and then a surcharge for any additional vents (a practice that can sometimes mislead inattentive customers; this fee structure is ripe for—though by no means a guarantee of—hidden charges). Another common fee structure uses the livable square feet of your home to calculate the service price. When booking your initial appointment, you will likely be asked questions designed to gather this type of preliminary information.

2. What is the cost for cleaning additional systems?

Most air duct cleaning companies base their prices on one system—that is to say, the HVAC ducts and vents associated with one furnace or air conditioning unit. If your home has more than one HVAC unit (applies mostly to larger homes), you'll want to ask what the cost will be to clean the additional systems. Some companies may offer a discount on any subsequent systems.

3. What additional charges can I expect, if any?

There are many factors that can increase the cost of performing an air duct cleaning service, and companies will rightly want to recover those costs; however, they should be up-front about them with you. For example, if your home is located outside of their typical service area, if you have more than one HVAC system, if the square footage of your home or number of vents exceeds the threshold, if a dead animal is contained within the ducts (it happens!), if there is sheet rock dust or construction materials inside your ducts, etc. Also, keep in mind that if your state collects sales tax on services (as is the case in Minnesota), your county's sales tax rate will be applicable.

4. Will your technicians give me a professionally educated opinion as to what level of cleaning is needed for my home?

Sometimes customers simply aren't sure what level of air duct cleaning is necessary, especially if they are new to their home. A thorough technician should ask you pointed questions about your home (how long since the ducts have been cleaned, any pets, any recent reconstruction/remodeling—especially that which would produce sheet rock dust, etc.) to help determine what level of cleaning may be appropriate. Beyond that, many can make an assessment on the spot after asking the right questions and taking a look at key points in your HVAC system (such as the main return trunk-line and the furnace itself) and then explain why they reached the recommendation they did. You should always be free to accept or decline their recommendation without penalty.

5. Will your technicians provide me with before and after photos of my air ducts?

If this is important to you, you should ask up-front before booking, because the company you're considering may or may not provide before and after photos of your ducts. Some companies may only provide this service with their higher levels of cleaning, and some may not provide it at all. (Keep in mind if you do request photos, if your air ducts are cleaned regularly, there may not be a stark difference between the before and the after.)

6. Will your technicians check other components of the HVAC system that may cause cross-contamination if not cleaned, and if so, offer me a fair price on additional services?

Your air ducts do not work in isolation—they are part of your home's larger heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) system that is comprised of many parts that work in harmony. If one part of the system is dirty, because they are all connected, an air duct cleaning alone may not be sufficient. A good technician will check the other components of the system, such as the furnace, A-coil, air exchanger, etc., and if necessary, make recommendations for servicing those as well. Many companies provide discounted prices on additional services performed during the same visit.

7. Where can I find honest testimonials of your work from previous customers?

A reputable company, even one without a long history, will have at least some on-line reviews available that can be used as a criterion to evaluate them. Check out sites like Google, Yelp, Thumbtack, and the Better Business Bureau. A good rule of thumb is to allow more credence to those reviews that provide a reasonable level of narrative and detail (technician's first name, date of service, service performed, interaction details—those kinds of things) rather than those who merely issue a rating with no commentary. Honest, invested reviewers will often take the time necessary to lend credibility to their review with at least a few details.

8. What kind of equipment will be used for the air duct cleaning process?

There are many different processes for cleaning air ducts, some more effective than others, and your choice of process will affect the price you pay. Air duct cleaning essentially consists of agitating debris loose from the ducts and sending it toward a containment system. Some common methods for agitation include high-pressured air wands (usually considered a standard method), and various enhancements including spinning brushes and tentacled air whips, among others. The containment system will consist of a vacuum of some kind, ranging from small hand-vac size, to a portable vacuum on wheels or a dolly, to a truck-mounted or an industrial-grade containment system. (Word to the wise: suction power does not always directly correlate with size. A portable vacuum positioned right next to the furnace can have more suction power than a truck-mounted system 20 feet away.) Companies using state-of-the-art equipment will come at a higher price tag.

9. What kind of steps will your technicians take to preserve the cleanliness of my home and prevent the blowing-back of dust into my living area?

A company whose technicians remove their shoes before entering (or wear shoe covers) and lay tarps underneath their equipment to protect your flooring demonstrate respect for the cleanliness of your home and an implicit acknowledgement that most homeowners don't want dirt dragged from other customers' homes into theirs. Air duct cleaning is inherently a messy process, but the company you hire should take every step necessary to prevent any debris from entering your living space, whether from the bottom of their shoes or from the ducts themselves. Regarding "blowback," several safeguards can minimize the potential for this, including negative pressure applied near the furnace by a vacuum, and magnetic vent covers placed over the return vents when cleaning the main return. Even within a single company, the practice of particular technicians can vary. If this is a main concern for you, state that when booking. Duct cleaning schedulers often hear things like, "Send me your most obsessively clean tech."

10. How long has your company been around? How many years of experience do your technicians have?

The air duct cleaning industry is unfortunately a world inhabited by the dedicated and the opportunistic alike. Fortunately, those not committed to providing a quality product often quickly close up shop and move on, perhaps realizing there isn't a quick buck to be made. A keen shopper will ask questions about how long the company has been in business and how experienced its technicians are. A company with a long history of service and a large collection of positive reviews has a vested interest in keeping its customers happy by resolving disputes in good faith and maintaining that longevity—along with its competitive edge. A pool of technicians with several years of on-the-job experience is an invaluable asset as well, as they will have had lots of exposure to uncommon situations and unique set-ups that enhance their troubleshooting skills as well as their ability to assess a home's HVAC cleaning needs and make appropriate recommendations.