THE DIRT ON HUMIDIFIERS

DID YOU KNOW that you should clean your humidifier every day? You probably didn’t, given that 59 percent of respondents in an informal poll told us they don’t clean theirs daily. And 26 percent admitted that they cleaned their humidifier just twice per month or even less often than that.

But that’s a mistake. Dirty machines can release bacteria from standing water into the air, potentially causing flu-like symptoms—especially in people who suffer from asthma or allergies.

Our testers took our most recent batch of 34 models and measured microbial growth in our clean-air tests, go to ConsumerReports.org/humidifiers.

One type did best in our tests: The evaporative humidifier, which blow unheated air over a wet Wick, didn’t emit any bacteria. All but one of the two other types—the ultrasonic (fine mist) and the vaporizer (steam)—did.

How to clean yours: Drain, rinse, and dry it every day. Every week, remove any visible residue with vinegar, disinfect with a bleach solution following the manufacturer’s instructions, then rinse thoroughly. Do the same before and after storing your humidifier for the season.

For full ratings and the 11 models that performed will in our clean-air tests, go to ConsumerReports.org/humidifiers.

YOU MIGHT BE SURPRISED to learn that most of the damage to your battery is done in summer, when high temperatures drive up the heat under our hood and accelerate the onset of failure. If your battery is aging, wintertime’s low temperatures and thickened engine oil could be the final nail in the coffin.

Your first indication of battery failure might be a no-start, but you may have missed an earlier, more subtle warning. Signs of impending failure include the following:

1.) The obvious. The battery warning light appears on your vehicle’s instrument panel.

2.) Ignition. The engine cranks slowly when the ignition key is turned.

3.) The Lights. The headlights dim when the vehicle idles.

Complicating matters, those are the same warning signs as a failing charging system or corroded battery cables. If your vehicle shows those symptoms, have a repair shop perform a simple check of your battery and charging system—it’s often free with the understanding that the shop will perform any subsequent repairs. Your mechanic should do a battery-system check as part of winterization. If your battery is not ready for replacement, you can carry a lithium-ion “jump pack” in your trunk. The Spirit A8 Car Jump Starter, $70, did very well in our tests.

Make Sure It’s Safe

About 25,000 house fires and 300 deaths are attributed to space heaters each year, mostly caused when a heater is placed too close to furniture. In addition, 6,000 people end up in the emergency room with burns from touching a heater’s hot surface. The safest heaters in our tests have an output of 1,500 watts, the output of those pint-sized space heaters ranges from 200 to 900 watts, so they cost less to run. Toss in the batch is the 6-pound Vornado SRTH, $45, with an output of 900 watts. It is good at spot heating, stays cool to the touch, and is relatively quiet. The Bionaire BCH4562E, $40, isn’t quite as good t heating, but it’s super quiet and has a motion sensor that shuts off the heater if movement is detected within 2 hours. We also tested the Honeywell HCE100B, $25, and the Lasko MyHeat 110, $20. They don’t perform as well, but with outputs of 250 and 200 watts, respectively, they don’t cost as much to operate—$10 per season compared with $50 for the Vornado.

PLAN PRICING among the big four carriers (AT&T, Verizon, Sprint, and T-Mobile) is so bizarre and counterintuitive that customers, particularly those with multiple phone lines, may actually spend more money when trying to be frugal. Though the plans offer unlimited voice minutes and texts, the providers often charge a fee for every phone that accesses the service. And those fees can be higher when you buy less data. Adding to the confusion, T-Mobile insists on a specific data bundle options vary in size among carriers. But with a calculator and these tips, you can slice through the subterfuge.

Tip 1: Consider purchasing more data than you think you need. Sprint Charges a $20 access fee per phone for data buckets of 4GB or less. (The 4GB of data, all sharable, cost $60.) But if you choose the company’s 8GB plan, that fee fails to $15 per phone. (8GB of data cost $70.) Do the math and you’ll find that if you have four phones, the total cost for either option is precisely $130.

Tip 2: Stay away from the two-year contracts still available at AT&T, Sprint, and Verizon. In addition, to hefty early-termination fees, you may have to contend with a whopping monthly $40-per-phone access fee.

Tip 3: Consider the extras. T-Mobile allows subscribers to stream content from a number of popular video services without using any data allowance. Those services include ESPN, HBO, Hulu, Netflix, Showtime, and Starz. That means binge-watchers can indulge their passion on a minuscule data plan.

THE BEST IN PETITE HEAT

WE TESTED four personal heaters that can be placed under a desk or workbench to boost the heat in a confined space, such as your cubicle at work. (doesn’t everyone had cold toes?) Though most of the regular heaters in our tests have an output of 1,500 watts, the output of these pint-sized space heaters ranges from 200 to 900 watts, so they cost less to run. Toss in the batch is the 6-pound Vornado SRTH, $45, with an output of 900 watts. It is good at spot heating, stays cool to the touch, and is relatively quiet. The Bionaire BCH4562E, $40, isn’t quite as good t heating, but it’s super quiet and has a motion sensor that shuts off the heater if movement is detected within 2 hours. We also tested the Honeywell HCE100B, $25, and the Lasko MyHeat 110, $20. They don’t perform as well, but with outputs of 250 and 200 watts, respectively, they don’t cost as much to operate—$10 per season compared with $50 for the Vornado.

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BE AWARE OF PRICING TRAPS

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