

Most Reliable Central Air Conditioning Systems

Brands most likely to keep you cool, according to CR's survey of nearly 22,000 members

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Installing or replacing a central air conditioning system is one of a homeowner's biggest expenses, so you'll want to get it right the first time.

It's not practical for Consumer Reports to test central air conditioning systems because there are so many variables, including a home's size and design, how the system is installed, and construction of the ductwork. Instead, we estimate the reliability of major brands on the market by asking our members about their experiences with the central AC systems they have purchased and had installed.

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In our latest central air conditioning survey, 21,770 of our members told us about the central air conditioning system they had installed between 2007 and 2018. They told us which parts break and what it costs to fix their central AC, if repairs were needed. We also asked them how likely they are to recommend their system to friends and family, and used their responses to calculate owner satisfaction ratings.

“Choosing a brand with higher predicted reliability and better owner satisfaction will boost your chances of getting an air conditioning system that you can depend on,” says Simon Slater, CR’s manager of product survey research.

Members expect their central air systems to last for a median of 15 years. Our findings are based on central air conditioning systems that are used a median of five months a year. Here are the details.

Reliability and Satisfaction

To calculate predicted reliability, we use our extensive survey data to estimate how likely a system is to break or cease to sufficiently cool a home by the end of the fifth year. Of the 21 brands captured in our survey, none earn an Excellent rating

for reliability; seven earn a favorable rating of Very Good; and nine brands earn a rating of Good, which is just average.

Brands that earn a Fair or Poor rating for reliability in our product surveys are not eligible to be recommended by Consumer Reports. In this survey, no brand earned a Poor score but five rated Fair: At this time we cannot recommend central ACs from Coleman, Frigidaire, Luxaire, Maytag, or York.

Our owner satisfaction rating is based on the percentage of members who are extremely likely to recommend their central air brand to others. Five brands get a top rating of Excellent for satisfaction, including Trane, American Standard, Bryant, Lennox, and Carrier. Armstrong and Ducane earn Very Good satisfaction ratings, as do Rheem and Ruud. The other 12 brands earn a rating of Good (average) for owner satisfaction. (None rated Fair or Poor.)

Problems and Repairs

Central AC systems aren't particularly prone to breaking down, and no brand stands out as having components that are more trouble-prone than those of other brands. The evaporator coil, which resides in the indoor unit, is the part most likely to break, with five percent of all owners reporting this problem. Next are problems with condenser coils (outdoors), controls (excluding the thermostat), and the blower. Issues with compressors, fans, and valves were reported in even fewer numbers.

Of the central AC systems captured in our survey, 23 percent broke down at some point. Of those, 97 percent were

successfully repaired, according to our members. Repairing a central AC system rather than replacing it makes financial sense, given that in our survey the median cost of a repair was \$250 when paid completely out of pocket, versus \$5,700 to get a new system installed. However, less than half of the repairwork is paid out of pocket—among our members, repairs are usually covered by a warranty or a service contract.

Manufacturers of central air conditioning systems recommend that owners have them serviced by a professional at least once a year, and 56 percent of our members do. Numbers drop dramatically after that with 21 percent having their system serviced every two or three years, 8 percent reporting less than every three years, and another 15 percent reporting that they never had routine maintenance.

Keep Your AC System Humming

Even if you buy the most reliable air conditioning system, it can let you down if you don't tend to some regular maintenance. Some tasks require a professional, but others you can do yourself.

Keep it clean. Be sure hedges and plants are at least 2 feet away from the outside unit. Clean grills and filters monthly. Clear debris and dirt from condenser coils, and check for blockages in the drain pipe.

Seal and insulate ducts. Up to 30 to 40 percent of energy can escape through air leaks or when ducts aren't insulated. Sealing them will keep you cooler in summer and warmer in winter.

Seasonal checks. Once a year, have a licensed professional change all filters, clean and flush the coils, drain the pan and drainage system, and vacuum the blower compartments. The contractor should also check that the system is properly charged with refrigerant, that there are no leaks, and that all mechanical components are working properly.

More Details

To see the [reliability ratings for all 21 brands](#), [log in or become a member](#).

Source: Results are based on Consumer Reports' 2017 Fall and 2018 Summer surveys of 21,770 owners of conventional central air conditioning systems. Our statistical model estimates breakage rates (a system breaks down or ceases to sufficiently cool a home) by the end of the fifth year of ownership for systems that are not covered by an extended warranty or service contract. We also adjust for the number of months the system is used over a 12-month period. The median number of months during which these systems are used among our members is five per year.