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Storage tank water heaters: Hot tips for a better buy

- **See whether it's fixable.** While a corroded, leaking tank isn't salvageable, a leaky drain valve or pressure-relief valve or a worn-out electric heating element can be repaired. But replacing the heater may make more sense.
- **Look past capacity.** Most water heaters are sold on that basis. But a water heater's first-hour rating (FHR) is more important, since it tells you how much hot water the heater can deliver in an hour of use. Determine how much hot water you need based on the busiest hour of an average day. Figure on roughly 2 gallons for shaving, 4 gallons for washing face and hands, 5 gallons for preparing food, 10 gallons for a dishwasher, and 20 gallons each for a 10-minute shower and a load of laundry. Factor in growing children and other issues that can increase your water needs.
- **Look for a long warranty.** Most cover 6, 9, or 12 years. Heaters with the lowest and highest warranties differ by just \$60 to \$80 for electric models and \$50 to \$100 for gas units.
- **Measure before you buy.** Recent tougher federal energy standards require about 10 percent higher efficiency for gas water heaters and about 5 percent for electric models. But the insulation added to meet those standards has made some heaters up to 4 inches fatter, a potential problem for closets and other tight spots.
- **Consider gas.** Based on national average fuel costs, gas heaters cost roughly half as much to run as electric models and can pay for their higher up-front cost in as little as a year. Factor in the cost of running a gas line to your home if you don't have one. Also consider adding insulation to hot-water pipes and the cold water pipe exiting the water heater.
- **Keep it safe.** New 30-, 40-, and 50-gallon gas heaters are designed to prevent the heater's flame from igniting flammable vapors in the room. As with any fuel-burning appliance, however, you'll still need smoke and carbon-monoxide (CO) detectors.

