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Guide to troubleshooting your appliances

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Before shelling out money for a major repair or – gulp! – a new machine, read this.By Liz Welch of [Real Simple](#)

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Few household aggravations rank higher than dealing with leaking, thumping or malfunctioning appliances. Sometimes the machine will be beyond hope, destined for the recycling pile. Other times an inexpensive repair is all that's needed. So how do you diagnose the problem? And how do you figure out whether it's a job for a licensed technician or one you can handle yourself? Here, learn the most common symptoms of appliance trouble, what causes them and whether you or a pro should fix the unit or if the time has come to ditch it.

Refrigerator

Problem: It's not cooling or freezing well.**It could be:** The condenser coils. Found behind the kick plate at the front or the back of the unit, they can easily become caked with dust.**Verdict:** Fix it yourself. Unplug the refrigerator, loosen dirt with a soft-bristle brush, then vacuum.**It could be:** The gaskets, the rubber strips that seal the doors shut. "Close the doors on a dollar bill at several spots," says Chris Hall, co-founder of the appliance-parts vendor [RepairClinic.com](#). "If the bill slips, you need a new gasket."**Verdict:** Fix it yourself. To install a gasket (\$40 to \$60; read about where to find parts and service at the end of this article), take out the old one and screw the new one in, making sure the door is properly aligned.*Article continues below*

More People Expected To Be In Need Of Home Heating Assistance

Date: 10/17/2011 **Duration:** 001:0043 **Video By:** [WPTZ Plattsburgh-Burlington](#)

The price of oil maybe down now but that doesn't mean people won't be shelling out lots of money to heat their homes this winter.

[▶ More Videos](#)**It could be:** Frost buildup in a self-defrosting freezer. A bad thermostat or compressor could be at fault. Either way, you'll need to call a repairman.**Verdict:** If it's the thermostat, a pro can fix that. Parts and labor will cost \$100 to \$175, says repairman Eric Kleinert, who writes the appliance-repair blog [erickleinert.blogspot.com](#). If the compressor is shot, you should probably ditch the machine (see how to dispose of appliances at the end of this article). "A new compressor is \$500 to \$700," Kleinert says. "It's not worth the cost if the refrigerator was less than \$1,000 or is more than 5 years old."

Problem: It's making strange noises.

It could be: Paper or some other debris caught in the condenser fan. Listen for a sound like a playing card rattling in the spokes of a wheel.

Verdict: Fix it yourself. Unplug the unit, then unscrew the back panel to get to the fan on the bottom right. Remove any foreign objects.

It could be: The freezer fan motor, which squeals.

Verdict: Have a pro fix it for \$150 to \$250.

It could be: The compressor. When that part stops working, it makes a thumping sound.

Verdict: Ditch the refrigerator.

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Problem: The ice maker has stopped working.

It could be: The bale lever, which looks like a hanger. It may be flipped to the off position.

Verdict: Fix it yourself. Just switch the lever on; it should be pointing down.

It could be: A clog in the water valve. Here's how to test it: Place a finger in the mold above the ice bucket. No cubes means there's a potential clog.

Verdict: Have a pro fix it for \$185 to \$275.

Stove/cooktop**Problem: The gas burners spark, but there's no flame.**

It could be: Clogs in the holes of the gas burners.

Verdict: Fix the problem yourself. Clean out the holes with a safety pin or a needle, Kleinert says, but don't use a toothpick; the tip can break off and become a fire hazard. Also make sure that the burners aren't blocking the openings where the gas comes out; this can happen if the grates get bumped accidentally.

Professional Services

It could be: Food spills or oil coating the spark plugs, the small, rod-shaped igniters on each burner that create the spark to light the flame.

Verdict: Fix it yourself. Scrub the plugs with a toothbrush and a mixture of soap

and warm water, says Lance Kimball, owner of Appliance Repair Specialists, a service company in Tampa, Fla.

Problem: The oven won't heat properly.

If you have a gas oven, it could be: The glow-bar igniter. In most cases, Hall says, you can see a red glow from the igniter, a harmonica-shaped piece usually found beneath the floor of the oven, by peering through the vent holes in the bottom panel. "If it's glowing for more than three minutes but your gas doesn't turn on, you probably need a new igniter," he says.

Verdict: Have a pro fix it. "An experienced technician should replace an igniter, since you're dealing with gas," Kleinert says. "He or she will check the entire system to make sure there are no leaks." Parts and labor run \$150 to \$300.

If you have an electric oven, it could be: The bake element, a thick, heat-radiating wire on the oven floor that should turn a deep red when the oven is on. "You'll see a dark burn spot on the element if it's no longer working properly," says Roman Kagan, chief executive officer of [AppliancePartsPros.com](#).

MSN Money: [When DIY goes wrong](#)

Verdict: Fix it yourself. A bake element costs \$20 to \$40 and is easy to replace. Unplug the stove -- or switch off the circuit breaker if you can't reach the plug -- unscrew the screws that hold the element in place, pull it out, and pop in the new one.

It could be: A broken thermostat or selector switch. If the bake element works, those parts -- both found in the control panel -- are the likely culprits.

Verdict: Have a pro fix it. Replacing a thermostat should cost \$220 to \$300; a selector switch will run \$190 to \$250.

Problem: The glass cooktop is broken.

It could be: A casualty of a cast-iron pan, a meat cleaver or a heavy bottle of vinegar or oil.

Verdict: Fix it yourself. "Glass cooktops cost \$150 to \$250, and some go up to \$400," Kagan says, but replacing one is easy. First, unplug the stove. On a range, two screws at the front generally hold the top in place. Unscrew them, lift the top up and pull it out of the hinge. Install the new top. If you have a cooktop, "open the cabinet under it," Kagan says. "Look up and you'll see the brackets that hold the cooktop in place. Remove them with a screwdriver before lifting the old glass and swapping it with the new. Then resecure the brackets."

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