



Emergency AC Repair Service

The east-corridor ductless specialist.

FIELD GUIDE · BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

When to Call vs DIY: HVAC Emergency Decision Tree

Some HVAC problems are 5-minute homeowner fixes. Others are "do not touch — call a tech now." Here's how to tell which is which.

Who this is for: Anyone who'd rather not call a tech if they don't have to — but doesn't want to electrocute themselves or destroy a \$5,000 unit either.

What's inside: The 8 most common HVAC symptoms and the right answer for each. The three NEVER-DIY situations. The two "absolutely DIY" wins. And the line where capable homeowners stop and call.

Service area: Birmingham east corridor — Leeds, Moody, Pinson, Clay, Springville

When to Call vs DIY: HVAC Emergency Decision Tree

Some HVAC problems are 5-minute homeowner fixes. Others are "do not touch – call a tech now." Here's how to tell which is which.

The Honest DIY Rule

If a fix involves refrigerant, opening sealed electrical components, modifying ductwork, or changing line voltage wiring – you don't DIY it. Federal law and Alabama HVAC code agree on this, and so does common sense. Everything else – filters, drains, breakers, thermostat batteries, outdoor unit cleaning – is fair game for any homeowner who can read a manual.

Symptom 1 – System Won't Turn On

- DIY first: thermostat batteries, breaker reset, outdoor disconnect, check for blown fuse on the air handler control board (visible cylinder fuse)
- Call a tech if: breaker trips again after one reset, control board fuse blows again after replacement, you hear humming but no fan start

Symptom 2 – AC Runs But Isn't Cooling

- DIY first: change filter, look for ice on copper lines (if iced, shut down and let thaw), check outdoor unit for obstructions, clean condenser coil with garden hose
- Call a tech if: thawed and still not cooling, vents blow warm, or if you suspect low refrigerant (slow gradual cooling loss, system runs constantly)

Symptom 3 — Loud Noises

- DIY first: listen carefully. Identify location (outdoor vs indoor)
- Buzzing at startup, then stops → likely capacitor on its way out. Schedule daytime service
- Screeching or metal-on-metal → blower bearings or motor failing. Shut off the system. Call a tech
- Banging from outdoor unit → loose fan blade or compressor mount. Shut off. Call now
- NEVER open the unit while it's running

Symptom 4 — Water Around Indoor Unit

- DIY first: check for clogged condensate drain — flush with 1 cup bleach + 1 cup water. Wait 30 min, retest
- Call a tech if: water continues after drain flush, secondary drain pan full, water-damaged ceiling appearing, or float switch keeps shutting off the system

Symptom 5 — Burning Smell

- NEVER DIY. Shut off the unit at the breaker IMMEDIATELY
- Two types: dust burning off heat exchanger (first run of season, brief, goes away in 30 min) — that's normal
- Sharp electrical or plastic smell, persists, or smoke — call 911 first if active fire risk, then a tech
- A burning smell from a running HVAC system is never something to "let run"

Symptom 6 — Refrigerant Issues

- Symptoms: low cooling, ice on copper lines, hissing sound at the indoor coil, oily residue around fittings
- NEVER DIY. Refrigerant work requires EPA Section 608 certification under federal law
- Topping off a low refrigerant system is a band-aid; the leak must be found and fixed
- Refrigerant charges in 2026 are \$100-\$200/lb. The diagnostic is worth doing correctly

Symptom 7 — Heat Doesn't Work (Winter)

- DIY first (gas furnace): check gas valve, check thermostat, check filter, listen for the inducer fan and ignition click on startup
- DIY first (heat pump): check breaker, outdoor disconnect, look for ice buildup on outdoor coil. Light frost is normal; a solid block of ice means defrost failure
- NEVER DIY: gas valve replacement, pilot or hot-surface ignitor work, flame sensor cleaning if you don't recognize the part, anything involving the heat exchanger
- Carbon monoxide risk on gas appliances is real. Call a tech

Symptom 8 — Electrical Smell or Spark

- Shut off the breaker
- Do not open the unit
- Call a tech
- Do not "wait until morning"

The "Absolutely DIY" Wins

These ALWAYS pay back. Do them yourself, save the service-call fee:

- Replace the air filter every 30 days (basic 1-inch filters)
- Spray the outdoor condenser with a garden hose every 3 months (gentle pressure, top-down, never a pressure washer)
- Keep 2 feet of clear space around the outdoor unit
- Replace thermostat batteries annually
- Flush the condensate drain line twice a year (1 cup bleach + 1 cup water)

The "Never DIY" Three

These will hurt you, kill you, or destroy your equipment:

- Refrigerant — federal law, EPA 608 required
- Gas connections / heat exchanger work — carbon monoxide and explosion risk
- Line-voltage (120V/240V) electrical inside the unit — burns, shocks, fire

About Emergency AC Repair Service

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This guide was written by working HVAC techs, not marketing teams. Direct, honest, practical. Real Alabama numbers, real local context, no guarantees we can't back up.

If something in here saved you a service call — or saved you from a bad one — share it with a neighbor. That's the whole point.

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Licensed Alabama HVAC contractor. Written estimates. No surprise bills.