

Tankless water heaters have both pros and cons

BY NANCY SUNDSTROM
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If you're in the market for a new hot water heater, there is a new trend that you may want to investigate.

Tankless water heater systems, also known as on-demand or instantaneous hot water heaters, have become better-known in the recent years due to their long life span of nearly 20 years and their ability to save on water, energy and operating costs over the long run. The drawback is that they can cost twice as much as a standard water heater.

Tankless water heaters heat water only as it is used — or on demand — an appealing idea for those who are more conservation or energy-minded in a society where the typical U.S. household wastes more than 9,000 gallons of water a year while waiting for it to heat. On average, hot water heating accounts for 20 percent or higher of a family's annual energy bills.

However, over time there is a payback in operating costs as they save both water and energy. And since there is no tank to rust out, tankless water heaters have a very long life. They are repairable if a part wears out, as opposed to a standard water heater tank, which must be replaced when the tank rusts and leaks (every five, 10 or 15 years, depending on the unit). The lifespan of a tankless water heater can be as long as 20 years.

Tankless systems are available in units fueled by propane, natural gas, oil

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Jason Uithol, owner, Affordable Plumbing

or electricity. The electric tankless heaters are more expensive to operate but almost 100 percent efficient; gas tankless heaters are about 75 percent efficient. Conventional tank water heaters are considerably less efficient than tankless because large amounts of heat energy are lost while maintaining a mass of hot water sitting in the tank waiting to be used.

Unlike conventional systems, tankless units use a heating device that is activated by a constant supply of water when a hot water valve is opened. Gas models have a higher hot water output than electric system, but as with traditional tank water heaters, even the largest whole house tankless gas models can't supply enough hot water for simultaneous, multiple uses of hot water, such as having showers, laundry and dishwasher all operating at once.

Tankless water heaters take up little space (about two cubic feet), and are often mounted out of sight,

on a wall, under a sink or in a closet. They can be installed at a central location or at a specific usage point.

Locally, those who work in the plumbing and heating industry have mixed reviews for tankless systems.

Frank Addis has been with Sheren Plumbing & Heating in Traverse City for the past 20 years, and serves as the company's general manager. His view is that the tankless systems Sheren has installed for customers have proven to be less dependable over time than standard water heaters.

“I've been in the business for 26 years, so I've seen continual changes in electric and gas heaters for both tankless and standard heaters,” Addis said. “The tankless don't seem to hold up as well, primarily because it tries to heat water in a small container so rapidly that minerals deposit and leads to a lack of flow or overheating.”

Companies keep pushing the tankless systems, and we probably have about a dozen or more people a year who inquire about them, so we answer questions and make recommendations on other systems and options. Overall, our experience with tankless has not been that good.”

Addis said that Sheren often suggests and installs indirect water heaters hooked to boiler system or a power-vented tank-type water heater, which yields high efficiency, is larger, has more “reliable components” and is easier to service.

“If you need a new water

heater, call a local plumber you trust and who will service your house and get their opinion,” he added. “Good plumbers and companies want to take care of the customer and what they need, and get them something dependable.”

Jason Uithol is an area plumber who has owned Affordable Plumbing for five years. His take on tankless systems is that while he has had a fair number of inquiries on them, there has been little actual demand for them, with price usually being the prohibitive factor.

“Most tankless systems run upwards of \$700-\$900, versus the \$300-\$400 that a standard water heater costs,” Uithol said. “What appeals to people about going tankless is that they can get water on demand, it's not just sitting there, and you only fire it up when you want water. My belief is that tankless heaters do pay for themselves in the long run by reducing fuel costs, but the majority of consumers aren't aware of them and tend to put in conventional water heaters.”

Uithol said that tankless systems are more likely to be installed in new construction projects and for those who are more “conservation-minded.” The average cost for a tankless water heater is approximately \$800 with labor and installation, but what attracts buyers to it is its ability to reduce fuel costs over time and the amount of space it saves.

“I recently put in a tankless system for a family who were doing a remodel

HOME HOW-TO

Go with the flow

Tankless water heaters, also referred to as on-demand or instantaneous hot water heaters, often cost twice as much as standard water heaters. However, there's a payback in operating costs as they save water and energy and can operate 20 years or more. Standard storage tank heaters last 10-15 years.

COMPARING TANKLESS WATER HEATERS

Electric tankless water heaters are almost 100 percent efficient (gas tankless water heaters are about 75 percent efficient).

On-demand water heaters that deliver 1-2 gallons per minute sell for about \$200; 3- to 5-gallon-per-minute units cost \$500-\$1,000.

Tankless water heaters, even the powerful whole-house models, take up about 2 cubic feet. They are often mounted on a wall or in a closet.



For information on models (both gas and electric) check: www.houseneeds.com/waterheatingproducts.

Copley News Service / Pete Chenan

job and were tired to having the water heater in the middle of the basement, which they wanted to make into a family room,” Uithol said, “16 by 20 inches is the average size for tankless, and they were able to store it out of the way and open up some previously unusable space. There haven't been any service issues yet, and they seem happy with the space it's saved.

The tankless systems have really only become popular over the last five years, so I think we're going to hear more about them.”

For information on major models of tankless water heaters, visit: www.houseneeds.com/waterheatingproducts.

Nancy Sundstrom is a local freelance writer.

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