Birmingham Heating & Air Conditioning

Heating and cooling in the heart of Shelby County.

FIELD GUIDE · BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

Repair vs Replace: Birmingham Decision Tree

A no-nonsense flowchart for deciding whether to fix your old AC or buy new — based on real Alabama numbers, not contractor sales pitches.

Who this is for: Anyone with an AC unit older than 8 years who's been quoted a repair and isn't sure if it's worth it.

What's inside: The 6-question decision tree, the "rule of 5000", real repair-cost benchmarks for Birmingham, what age each major component actually fails, and the question to ask before you sign any quote.

Service area: Shelby County, Alabama — Helena, Chelsea, Calera, Pelham, Alabaster, Hoover

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The Honest Truth First

No HVAC tech can tell you "this unit has 2 years left." Anyone who does is lying or guessing. What we can tell you is whether the math favors repair or replacement. That's what this decision tree does. Run through the questions. The answer falls out the bottom.

Question 1 — How Old Is It?

Look at the data plate on the outdoor unit. Find the serial number. The first 4 digits or letters usually encode year/week.

- 0-7 years old → Almost always repair. Components are still under warranty in many cases
- 8-12 years old → Now it gets interesting. Run the rest of the tree
- 13-15 years old → Repair only if cost is under $400. Above that, replace
- 16+ years old → Replace. The R-22 refrigerant alone makes any repair brutal

Question 2 — Refrigerant Type

Open the panel. The data plate will say R-22 or R-410A.

- R-22 = pre-2010, mostly. Refrigerant now costs $100-$200 a pound. Most leaks need 4-8 pounds. You're looking at $500-$1,600 just for the gas
- R-410A = post-2010. Reasonably priced refrigerant. Repair is usually viable
- R-454B = post-2025 new equipment. Definitely repair

Question 3 — What's the Quoted Repair?

Get the quote in writing. Now apply the "Rule of 5000."

- Multiply the unit's age (years) by the repair cost ($)
- If the result is over 5,000 → strongly consider replacement
- Example: 10-year-old unit, $600 repair = 6,000. Replace.
- Example: 14-year-old unit, $300 repair = 4,200. Repair.
- Example: 8-year-old unit, $800 repair = 6,400. Borderline — check Q4.

Question 4 — How Many Service Calls This Year?

Count actual paid service calls in the last 24 months (not preventive tune-ups).

- 0-1 calls → System is healthy enough. Repair
- 2 calls → Replace if quote is over $400
- 3+ calls → Replace regardless of quote. You're paying for new equipment one $250 call at a time

Question 5 — What Component Is Failing?

Some failures are normal wear; others are death warnings.

- Capacitor — Cheap fix. $150-$300. Repair always
- Contactor — Cheap fix. $150-$300. Repair always
- Blower motor — Mid-cost. $400-$900. Repair if under age 10
- Compressor — Expensive. $1,500-$3,500. Replace the unit. A new compressor on an old condenser is throwing money away
- Evaporator coil — Mid-cost. $1,000-$2,000. If the unit is over 10 years, replace it
- Refrigerant leak in the line set or coil — depends entirely on location. Some are $300 fixes; some are unfixable

Question 6 — How Bad Are the Power Bills?

Pull up your last August power bill and last August's before that. New 16-17 SEER equipment runs 30-40% more efficient than 12-year-old 13 SEER equipment.

- If your summer bills are $300+/month, a new unit pays back $80-$120 a month in savings
- $1,200 saved per year × 8-10 years of equipment life = $9,600-$12,000 in lifetime savings
- Factor that into the replacement decision. Replacement isn't just a fix — it's an investment with a real ROI

The Math, All Together

Birmingham's climate makes this decision harder than most US markets. We have 1,800-2,200 cooling hours per year — among the highest in the Southeast. Your AC works harder here than in Atlanta or Nashville. That means:

- Equipment ages faster here. 12 years in Birmingham = ~15 years in Chicago
- Efficiency gains pay back faster — high cooling hours = high $/SEER savings
- The "13-year tipping point" is more like 11 years in real Shelby County conditions

The Question to Ask Before You Sign

Whatever quote you get — repair or replace — ask the contractor: "What's the warranty on this work, and what does it cover for what term?" A real answer in writing tells you what they actually believe about the longevity. A vague answer is a red flag. Get it in writing before any work starts.

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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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