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TIME--NOT USE--IS BASIS FOR WARRANTY

Warranty clocks begin ticking upon purchase of an appliance with no regard for frequency of use. While major appliances in vacation homes may not see regular year-round use, four years of seasonal use do not add up to one warranty year. Rather, a one-year warranty covers the calendar year from the purchase date.

Become familiar with the terms -- and the time limit -- of your appliance warranty.

Coverage often varies with the product's components. For example, a window air conditioner warranty may cover free repairs for all parts during the first year of coverage but may extend coverage to partial payment for repairs to the sealed system components, such as the compressor and evaporator, for an additional four years.

Manufacturers can offer almost any type of warranty as long as they clearly state provisions and make the terms available for review before purchase. To protect yourself, use all the appliance's features before the warranty expires, as problems generally surface in the first few uses.

While seasonal use may result in less wear and tear on an appliance, there are two valid reasons for time-based warranties. Manufacturers cannot realistically base warranties on use because monitoring consumer use inside the home would prove impossible.

In addition, some appliances actually suffer more from extended periods of non-use than from continuous daily operation. For example, refrigerator and room air conditioner sealed systems can stay vacuum-tight for many years if the internal refrigerant gas and lubricant keep moving and softening the various seals. These seals may dry out if the mechanisms involved remain stationary.