HVAC HACKS # 9: HYDRONIC HEATING AND COOLING SYSTEM DESIGN - ESSENTIAL TIPS & RULES OF THUMB

An Online Continuing Education Course for Engineers

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HVAC HACKS # 9: HYDRONIC HEATING AND COOLING SYSTEM DESIGN - ESSENTIAL TIPS & RULES OF THUMB

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Ever wondered how warmth or coolness reaches your air vents? It all comes from the hidden network of pipes – the hydronic system, the circulatory system of your HVAC.

This 8-hour course is designed to provide you with the fundamental knowledge and practical insights necessary for mastering hydronic system design. Key topics include:

a. Fundamental Principles: Discover how water transfers heat and coolness throughout a building.
b. System Design and Sizing: Learn how to design and size hydronic systems, including piping networks, pumps, and heat exchangers.
c. Component Selection: Gain expertise in selecting the right components, such as pumps, valves, and control systems, to optimize system performance.
d. Distribution Schemes: Explore constant volume, variable volume, and primary-secondary systems.

You can find the **Key Rules of Thumb in Annexure - 2** for quick and easy reference. These guidelines, metrics, and thumb rules are based on sound engineering practices and the author's experience, but they may vary depending on operating conditions and other factors. This document is a live resource that will be updated regularly as new information becomes available.

Read to explore hydronic system distribution for cooling and heating. Let's get started!

Important Note: Two additional modules focusing on Efficient Cooling with Chillers (Module #8) and heat rejection options (Module #10) are available in the HVAC Hacks series. By reading both these modules, you'll gain a comprehensive understanding of complete chilled water system design solutions for large, centralized HVAC applications.

CHAPTER - 1: HYDRONIC SYSTEMS

Hydronic systems are a smart way to heat and cool buildings. They use water or a special water-antifreeze mix to move heat around. Think of it like a plumbing system but for heating and cooling. Water is heated or cooled in a central unit, then pumped through pipes to different parts of the building. This provides comfortable temperatures in various rooms, making it a flexible and efficient solution for climate control.

1.1 Hydronic Cooling Overview

In a hydronic cooling system, chilled water is circulated in a closed loop from chillers to air handling units (AHUs), fan coil units (FCUs), or terminal units. The cooling effect is achieved through heat transfer between the warmer indoor air and the colder circulating water. It's a reliable and efficient method for cooling large spaces while minimizing energy and resource consumption.

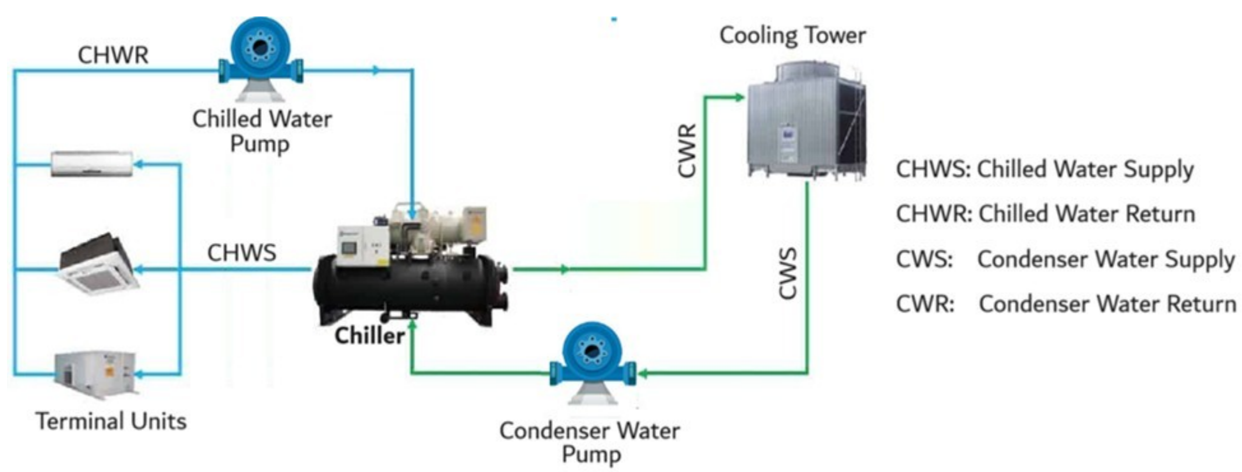

Figure 1. Hydronic Cooling System

Table 1. Hydronic Cooling System - Benchmark Values and Rules of Thumb

	Hydronic Cooling Systems	**Rules of Thumb**
	Chilled water flow rate	~2.4 GPM per ton at 10°F ΔT. Reduces with higher ΔT.
	Chilled water supply temperature	42°F to 50°F
	Chilled water return temperature	10°F, 12°F, 16°F or 18°F higher than the chilled water supply temperature

	Hydronic Cooling Systems	Rules of Thumb
	Chiller temperature range (ΔT)	10°F (typical), can be 12°F, 16°F or 18°F
	Condenser water flow rate	~3 GPM per ton at 10°F ΔT. Reduces with higher ΔT.
	Condenser water supply (inlet) temperature	85°F (as per AHRI 550/590 performance standards)
	Condenser water leaving temperature	95°F (as per AHRI 550/590 performance standards)
	Condenser temperature range (ΔT)	10°F (typical), can be 12°F
	Cooling tower water flow rate and inlet/outlet temperatures	Matches with respective condenser parameters
	Energy Efficiency Ratio (EER)	Aim for 12 or higher

1.2 Hydronic Heating Overview

A hydronic heating system uses water to move heat from where it is produced to where it is needed. This system uses a simple gas-fired water heater or boiler. Its purpose is to heat and store the water used throughout the building. Usually, a water heater only heats water for potable domestic use. Still, in this case, hot water is conveyed through the distribution piping and finally released into a heated space through radiators, baseboard heaters, or radiant floor systems.

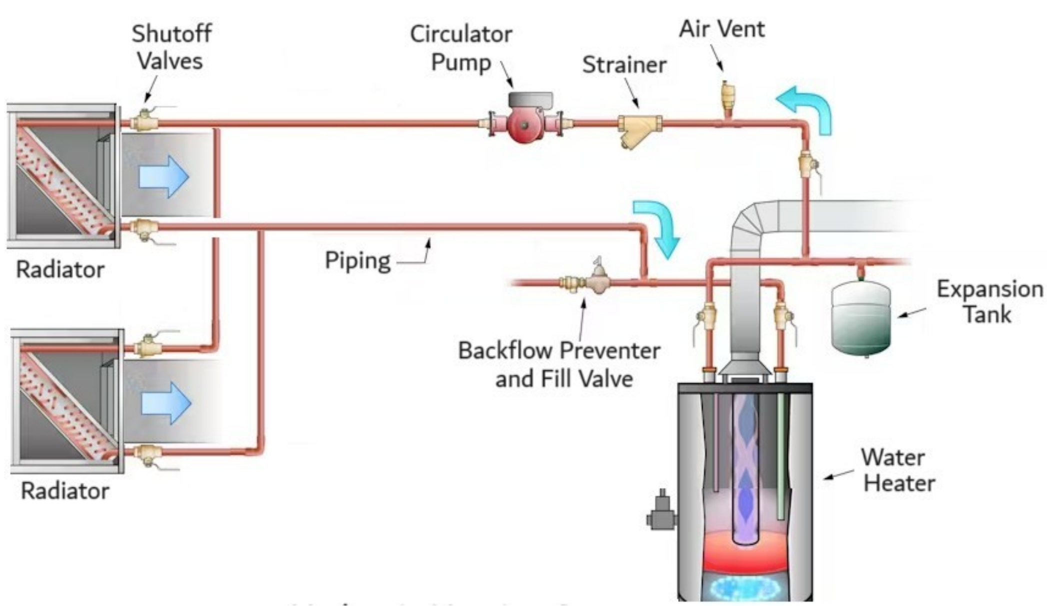

Figure 2. Hydronic Heating System

Table 2. Hydronic Heating System: Benchmark Values and Rules of Thumb

	Hydronic Heating Systems	Rules of Thumb
	Temperature Difference (ΔT) across Boiler	20°F to 30°F
	Flow rate	1 GPM per 10,000 BTU
	Hot Water Supply Temperature	140°F to 180°F
	System Efficiency	Modern condensing boilers: 90% or higher

1.3 Advantages of Hydronic System

Hydronic HVAC systems provide superior space savings, energy efficiency, precise temperature control, and a comfortable indoor climate compared to traditional forced-air systems.

Table 3. Reasons for Selecting Hydronic System

	Benefits of Hydronic Systems	Rules of Thumb
	Space Efficiency	Water stores 4 times more thermal energy than air and has a much smaller volume due to its higher density. It moves far easier in small pipes compared to bulky air ducts, saving valuable space for modern building projects. Example: 1-2” piping for 2.4 GPM/Ton vs. 8-12” ducts for 400 CFM/Ton.
	Energy Efficiency	Water's higher energy density allows for efficient distribution and lower power consumption.
	Enhanced Comfort	Eliminates drafts, hot/cold spots, and airborne particles.
	Flexibility & Scalability	Easily modified, ducted/ductless designs, adaptable to long-distance distribution with appropriately sized circulator pumps.
	Durability	Up to 25-year lifespan, dependent on installation and maintenance.
	Centralized Control	Independent zone control; simplified maintenance and operation.

These features make hydronic systems an attractive option for modern building design, providing comfort, efficiency, and sustainability.

Example: Space Saving Advantage of Hydronic System in a Tall Building

Consider a 100-floor building designed with a forced air system. Switching to a hydronic system can result in significant advantages:

a. Ductless Design: Hydronic systems allow for ductless units on each floor, eliminating the need for extensive ductwork. This creates a cleaner, sleeker aesthetic and frees up even more space within each floor plan.
b. Reduced Floor Height: Hydronic piping is less bulky than air ducts, allowing for a reduced floor height. This might seem like a minor adjustment, but in a 100-story building, even saving 6 inches (½ foot) per floor translates to 5 extra floors within the same building height.
c. More Floors, More Revenue: Additional floors mean increased usable space and rental income, leading to a more profitable design. This maximizes valuable real estate and offers greater flexibility for future tenants.

1.4 Key Hydronic Components

A hydronic system comprises various components that must work together seamlessly to ensure proper functionality. These components typically include primary equipment (such as heaters, boilers, and chillers), pumps, piping, fittings, terminal units, coils, and control valves. Below is a brief overview of the key components involved:

Table 4. Key Components of Hydronic System

Component	Function	Types	Rules of Thumb
Chillers (Chilled Water System)	Produce chilled water for building cooling.	Reciprocating, scroll, screw, centrifugal, absorption chillers.	Size to handle peak load + safety margin and diversity. 1 Ton = 12,000 BTU/hr.
Boilers (Hot Water System)	Heats water for space heating.	Gas-fired, oil-fired, electric, condensing boilers.	Size to meet design heating load, considering climate, building size, and insulation levels.
Pumps/Circulators	Circulate chilled or hot water.	Centrifugal, inline, end-suction, split-case pumps.	Size based on water flow rate (GPM) and pressure head (feet).
Piping	Distributes hot or chilled water.	Carbon steel, galvanized steel, copper, PEX, CPVC.	Size pipes based on flow rate and pressure drop. Typical water velocity 4-8 ft/s and pressure drop <4 ft of water per 100 ft of pipe.
Valves	Control fluid flow and pressure.	Ball, gate, globe, check, balancing, control valves.	Select valves to minimize pressure drop. Use balancing valves for even water distribution.
Terminal Units (AHUs and FCUs)	Deliver heating/cooling to	Radiators, convectors, fan coil units, induction units,	Size is based on the heating/cooling load of each

Component	Function	Types	Rules of Thumb
	building spaces.	radiant floor panels, VAV boxes, and air handling units (AHUs).	zone, typically using 30-60 BTU per square foot.
Expansion Tanks	Accommodate thermal expansion/ contraction.	Diaphragm, bladder type.	Size to 4% of total system water volume.
Air Separators	Remove air from the water distribution loop.	Hydronic separators, micro-bubble separators.	Size air separators based on system flow rate and water temperature.
Chemical Feed Water Treatment	Introduces treatment chemicals to prevent corrosion/scaling/microbial growth.	Direct injection feeders, chemical feed pots.	Size/select based on chemical type and dosage rate.
Blowdown System	Removes concentrated water from the cooling loop.	Automatic or manual systems.	Set blowdown frequency to maintain water quality, preventing the buildup of solids and contaminants.
Monitoring and Control	Monitors water parameters (pH, conductivity).	Automated systems with sensors and controllers.	Proactive adjustments to chemical feed rates and blowdown schedules…

These components work together to provide effective temperature control for both building environments and industrial processes.

1.5 Hydronic System Challenges

Hydronic HVAC systems, though energy-efficient and versatile, have certain challenges. They typically have higher upfront costs for equipment and installation, as well as complex design requirements for fresh air ventilation. They increase the risk of water damage due to leaks, which are often hard to detect and costly to repair. Maintenance tends to be labor-intensive and expensive. Noise from pumps, pipes, and terminal units can be an issue. Finally, hydronic systems may not suit all building types or climates, especially humid or extreme environments.

Table 5. Hydronic Systems Challenges

	Challenges	Rules of Thumb
	Upfront Costs	Expect a 10-20% higher initial investment due to complex piping, controls, and terminal units compared to forced-air systems.
	Complex Design/Installation	Installation costs are 10-20% higher due to additional piping, electri... control c...
	Separate Ventilation System	... in compliance with ASHRAE ... indoor air quality (IAQ).
	Environm...	...ling; gradual temperature
	Limited Co...	...oid condensation issues in ... cold climates.
	Leak and Wa...	...articularly in concealed
	More Mainte...	...he numerous terminal
	Noise Issues	...ure proper sizing and ... occupied spaces.
	Humidity and Ex...	...andle high-humidity ...ely.

Nevertheless, despite th... ...cant benefits when carefully designed and i...

Module #9 will guide you through the hydronic design fundamentals, selecting the right size pumps and piping for high-performance hydronic cooling systems. Note that the principles behind hydronic cooling and heating are similar.