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I have a newer house. Why is there an electrical switch beside my thermostat that controls the exhaust fan in my bathroom?

In many new homes, the purpose for this switch is a mystery to home owners, however, it does serve an important role. The purpose for installing this switch adjacent to the thermostat is partially to educate/remind homeowners that they should regularly operate the bathroom fan (also known as the principal exhaust fan) to maintain adequate ventilation in the home.

The logic behind the switch is that if you regularly run the fan to exhaust air from the bathroom to the exterior, then air from the hallway will flow into the bathroom to replace the exhausted air, which in turn causes air from an adjacent room to flow into the hallway, etc. until an exterior wall is encountered. Since air is being "pulled" away from the exterior wall towards the bathroom, fresh air is drawn through the thin cracks/joints in the air barrier installed in the exterior wall, which ultimately brings fresh air into the home. This process of ventilation is much more effective if the furnace blower (if present) is operated simultaneously with the principal exhaust fan.

Operating the blower helps to circulate air from the various rooms in the home, eventually to the bathroom and then to the exterior through the bathroom fan. It should be emphasized that regular operation of the principal exhaust fan is particularly important in well sealed houses.