

Thinking about Buying Your First Home?

With interest rates low, many renters are starting to think about purchasing a home of their own. While simple rental cost vs. mortgage cost comparisons can be very attractive, buying a home is a serious commitment with many factors to consider:

1. How long do you plan to live in the home?

Selling a home costs money. If you potentially may have to move in the short term, your home's value may not have appreciated enough to cover the costs of buying and selling.

The length of time it will take to cover those costs depends on various economic factors. Average appreciation tends to sit around 5% per year. In this case, you should plan to stay in your home at least 3-4 years to cover buying and selling costs. The real estate market can be particularly volatile, however, and dramatic swings up and down are not uncommon.

2. How long will the home meet your needs?

What features do you require in a home to satisfy your lifestyle right now? Five years from now? People tend to remain in homes longer than they initially intend, primarily due to the work and expenses associated with moving. Therefore it is worth considering a home with room to grow. Could the basement be turned into a den with extra bedrooms; the attic into a master suite? Having an idea of what you'll need will help you find a home that will satisfy you for years to come.

3. Your financial health—your credit and home affordability.

Is now the right time financially for you to buy a home? Would you rate your financial picture as healthy? Is your credit good? While you can always find a lender to lend you money, people with poor credit tend to pay far more than borrow.

Some say you should refrain from borrowing as much as you qualify for because it is wiser not to stretch your financial boundaries. The other school of thought says you should stretch to buy as much home as you can afford, because with regular pay raises and increased earning potential, the big payment today will seem like less of a payment tomorrow. It is, however, important to stay within your comfort zone. Purchasing a house involves many up-front and ongoing costs, and the stress of worrying about those costs often outweighs the satisfaction that may come from owning a slightly nicer home.

To determine how much home you can afford, talk to a lender or go online and use a home affordability calculator. Good calculators will give a range of what you may qualify for. Then call a lender. While some may say the "28/36" rule applies, in today's home mortgage market, lenders are making loans customized to a particular person's situation.

The "28/36" rule means your monthly housing costs can't exceed 28 percent of your income and total debt load can't exceed 36% of your total monthly income. Depending on your assets, credit history, job potential, and other factors, lenders can push the ratios up to 40-60% or higher. While we're not advocating you purchase a home utilizing the higher ratios, it is important for you to know your options.

4. Where will the money for the transaction come from?

Typically, homebuyers will need some money for a down payment and closing costs. However, with today's broad range of loan options, having a lot of money saved for a down payment is not always necessary—if you can prove you are a good financial risk for a lender. If your credit isn't stellar but you have managed to save 10-20% for a down payment, you will still appear to be a very good financial risk to a lender. High-ratio mortgages can be a good option for those who haven't managed to save a large chunk of money (who has?), but naturally, these have additional costs associated with them.

5. The ongoing costs of homeownership.

Maintenance, improvements, taxes, and insurance are all costs added to a monthly house payment. If you buy a condominium or townhouse, a monthly homeowner's association or maintenance fee will be required. If these additional costs are a concern, you can make choices to lower or avoid these fees. Be sure to make your Realtor® and your lender aware of your desire to limit these costs.