Rekeying vs replacing every lock: which option fits your situation

Rekeying vs replacing every lock: what each option involves

When you move into a new home or need to improve security after a lost key, the first question is whether to rekey the existing locks or replace them entirely. Both approaches have their place, and the right choice depends on the condition of your door hardware, the number of locks involved, and your long-term plans. Understanding how each method works helps you make a practical decision without unnecessary expense or effort.

Rekeying changes the internal mechanism of a lock cylinder so that old keys no longer work and a new key operates the lock. A locksmith removes the cylinder, replaces the key pins inside, and reassembles it. The lock body and handle stay in place, and the exterior appearance remains unchanged. This process can usually be done on site without removing the whole lock from the door.

Replacing a lock means removing the entire unit - cylinder, deadbolt, handle or knob - and installing a new one. This may involve matching the new hardware to the existing door preparation or making adjustments to the door itself. Replacement becomes necessary when the lock is physically worn, damaged, or incompatible with the security level you need.

Both options let you control who has access. The choice often comes down to the state of your current locks and whether you want to upgrade the style or function of the hardware at the same time.

When rekeying makes more sense

Rekeying is usually faster and more cost-effective if your existing locks are in good working order. The internal components of a lock cylinder wear over time, but many standard pin-tumbler cylinders can be rekeyed multiple times before they need replacement. A typical rekeying job covers all locks that use the same keyway, so that a single new key operates every lock on the property.

Common situations where rekeying is the better option include:

- Moving into a previously occupied home or apartment and wanting to ensure no one else has keys
- Losing a key or having one stolen, where the lock itself is still functioning well
- Ending a tenancy or employment relationship where former tenants or employees still hold keys

- Wanting to set up a master key system so that different levels of access can be granted without replacing all locks

Rekeying also allows you to keep the existing door hardware, which is helpful if the finish matches your decor or if the doors have non-standard preparations that would make replacement complicated. A professional lock rekeying service can usually handle several locks in a single visit, and the process does not disturb the door or frame.

One important detail: rekeying only changes the internal pins. It does not upgrade the lock's physical strength, resistance to picking, or any electronic features. If your current locks are basic models with low security ratings, rekeying keeps those same limitations in place. In that case, the extra cost of replacement may be worth it for the improved protection.

When replacement is the right call

Replacing a lock becomes necessary when the existing hardware is damaged, corroded, or beyond reliable service. A cylinder that has been forced, drilled, or subjected to weather exposure may bind or fail completely. Attempting to rekey a damaged cylinder can produce a lock that works poorly or jams at an inconvenient moment.

Another reason to replace is to upgrade security features. Modern deadbolts often include anti-pick pins, anti-drill plates, and hardened steel inserts that older locks lack. If your current locks are decades old or are basic builder-grade models, replacement gives you a chance to install hardware with a higher security rating. Keyless electronic locks, smart locks with access codes, or locks with restricted keyways are options that rekeying alone cannot provide.

Replacement also makes sense when you want to change the look or function of your entry hardware. If you are updating your front door and want a different finish, handle style, or a deadbolt with a thumb turn instead of a keyed cylinder on the inside, swapping the whole lock is the only path. The same applies if you need to match new locks to an existing master key system that uses a different keyway than your current locks.



Keep in mind that replacement may involve more work. The new lock must fit the door's existing bore holes and backset, or the door may need modification. Some locks require a larger diameter hole or a different latch size. A qualified locksmith can assess the door preparation and advise whether a direct swap is possible without additional carpentry.

Comparing the two approaches side by side

To clarify the trade-offs, here is a quick comparison of the main factors:

- **Cost:** Rekeying is generally less expensive per lock because it uses the existing hardware and only replaces the internal pins. Replacement includes the cost of the new lock unit and possibly door modifications.
- **Time:** Rekeying is usually quicker on-site, since the locksmith works with the existing cylinders. Replacement takes longer if the new lock needs to be fitted or adjusted.
- **Security level:** Rekeying maintains the same lock grade. Replacement allows you to choose a higher security grade or add features like bump resistance or electronic access.
- **Condition of existing hardware:** If locks are in good shape, rekeying is sufficient. If they are worn, damaged, or outdated, replacement is the safer bet.
- **Appearance and functionality:** Rekeying leaves the exterior unchanged. Replacement lets you change the look, finish, and type of lock.

There is no universal answer, but the condition of your door hardware and your security goals should guide the decision. A lock that still operates smoothly and shows no signs of forced entry is a good candidate for rekeying. A lock that feels loose, sticks, or dates from a time before modern security standards is probably better replaced.

Practical considerations for homeowners and property managers

If you manage multiple properties or units, consistency matters. Rekeying all locks to a single key simplifies access for tenants or staff and reduces the number of keys in circulation. A master key system, where a single key opens multiple locks but individual keys only open specific ones, can be achieved through rekeying alone. This avoids the cost and labour of replacing every lock in a building.

For a single-family home, the decision often comes down to the age and brand of the existing locks. Many popular residential lock brands offer rekeyable cylinders that a locksmith can service quickly. If the locks are from a brand that is no longer common or uses a proprietary keyway, replacement may be the only option because replacement cylinders or pins may not be available.

Another factor is the number of locks involved. Rekeying a house with three exterior doors is straightforward. Rekeying a large commercial building with dozens of locks may still be more efficient than replacing each one, provided the hardware is in good shape. A professional lock rekeying service can provide guidance on whether the existing locks are suitable for rekeying or if replacement would be more practical in the long run.

One last point: if you have recently changed locks for any reason and are unsure whether the new setup meets your security needs, a locksmith can inspect the installation and help securing recently changed locks. This ensures that the rekeying or replacement was done correctly and that no vulnerabilities remain. Even new locks can have minor issues with alignment or pinning that affect performance. A quick check can give you peace of mind.

Whether you choose rekeying or replacement, the goal is the same: to maintain control over who can enter your property. Both methods achieve that when done properly. The choice depends on the condition of your current hardware, your budget, and whether you want to upgrade security or appearance at the same time. A straightforward rekeying solves most access control problems without the fuss of new hardware. Replacement offers the chance to improve security and style in one move. Understanding the difference helps you make a confident decision.

If you ever find yourself unsure about the state of your locks, a professional inspection can clarify what is needed. A locksmith can assess the wear, check the cylinder operation, and

advise whether rekeying will suffice or if replacement is the smarter long-term investment. Taking that step early can prevent lock failures and help securing recently changed locks, keeping your home or business secure without unnecessary hassle.