Rekeying vs. replacing locks after buying a home

When you move into a house or condo that was previously owned or rented by someone else, you have no way of knowing who still holds keys to the front door. Previous owners may have handed copies to neighbours, contractors, or cleaning staff. Even if the seller says all keys are accounted for, the only safe move is to assume the lock can be operated by people you do not know. That leaves you with two practical choices: rekey the existing locks or replace them altogether. Both approaches improve security, but they suit different situations, budgets, and long-term plans. Understanding the difference helps you decide without overcomplicating the job.

What rekeying actually does

Rekeying changes the inside of a lock so that a new key works and the old one no longer does. A locksmith removes the lock cylinder, takes out the existing key pins, and installs a new set that matches a different key. The lock body and the hardware that shows on the face of the door stay exactly the same. The only thing that changes is the set of pins that align when the correct key slides in. That means the deadbolt or knob lock itself is the same physical piece, but it is now operated by a fresh key.

Rekeying works on most standard pin-tumbler cylinders. It is a common choice for new homeowners because it is quicker and less expensive than swapping the whole lock. If the existing hardware is in good condition and the style suits your home, rekeying gives you control over who has access without the mess of drilling or replacing strike plates. It also lets you match multiple locks to one key. If you have three exterior doors and all of them use the same brand and keyway, a locksmith can rekey them all to work with a single key. That simplifies your daily routine and reduces the number of keys on your ring.

When replacement makes more sense

Replacing a lock means removing the old hardware entirely and installing a new unit. This is the route to take when the existing lock is worn, damaged, or simply too low-grade to trust. Older locks may have loose tumblers, a sloppy feel, or visible rust inside the cylinder. A lock that sticks or jams regularly is a sign that the internal components are past their useful life. In that case, rekeying is a temporary fix at best. The new pins will still sit inside a worn cylinder that may fail when you need it most.



Replacement also matters when you want to upgrade the security grade of your locks. Residential lock installation covers a range of products, from basic key-in-knob sets to high-security deadbolts with reinforced strike plates. If the home came with builder-grade locks that use a simple spring latch and a short screw, a determined kick can break the door open in seconds. Swapping those out for a Grade 1 or Grade 2 deadbolt adds real physical resistance. You can also choose a lock with a hardened steel guard plate, a longer bolt throw, or anti-pick pins. None of those features can be added by rekeying; they require a new lock.

Smart locks and keyless access

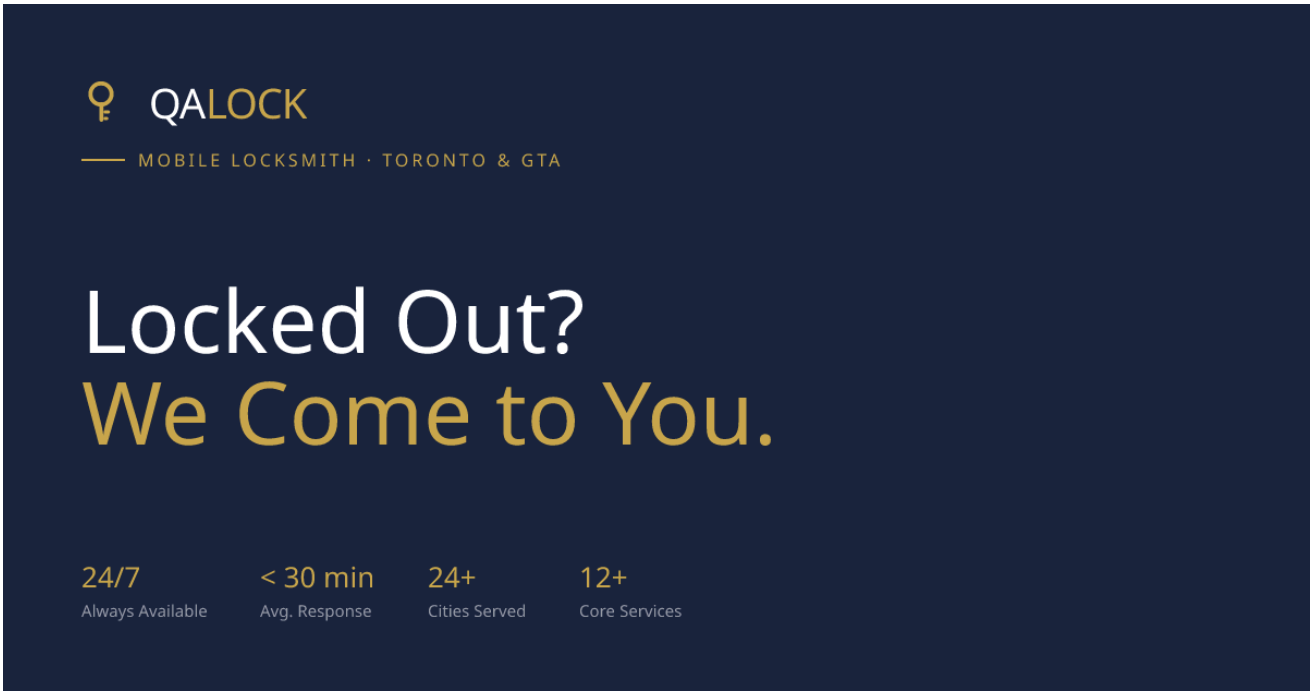
Keyless entry systems are a growing part of residential lock installation. A smart lock replaces the traditional cylinder with an electronic mechanism that reads a code, a fingerprint, or a Bluetooth signal from your phone. Some models keep the keyed cylinder as a backup; others are fully electronic. If you are buying a home and want to move away from physical keys entirely, a smart lock is a full replacement, not a rekey. The old hardware comes off and the new unit takes its place.

Smart locks add convenience and remote control, but they also introduce new considerations. They need batteries, and some models require a Wi-Fi hub or a dedicated app. If the previous owner left a smart lock in place, you cannot trust that their access codes have been fully deleted. Factory resetting the lock and setting up a new admin account is possible, but many homeowners prefer to start fresh with their own hardware so there is no question about who has access credentials. That is replacement, not rekeying.

Master key systems and multi-family buildings

If you bought a duplex, a triplex, or a building with a separate basement apartment, you may have inherited a master key system. That setup lets one key open multiple locks while individual keys open only their own lock. Rekeying a master-keyed building is more complex than a single home because the locksmith must arrange the pins so that both the change key and the master key work. If you want to eliminate the master key and give each unit its own unique key, a locksmith can rekey the cylinders to a non-mastered configuration. That is still a rekey, not a replacement, as long as the hardware is sound.

If the master key system is old or the hardware is mismatched, replacement may be the cleaner option. Installing new locks across the property lets you design a fresh access control plan from scratch. You can choose locks that share a common keyway for convenience or set up a new master key hierarchy without worrying about worn pins or incompatible cylinders. For a landlord or owner-occupant, the upfront cost of replacement often pays off in simpler management later.



Cost and time trade-offs

Rekeying is almost always the faster and cheaper option if the existing hardware is in good shape. A locksmith can rekey a single cylinder in under half an hour, and the cost is typically a fraction of a new lock. For a home with three or four exterior doors, rekeying all of them to one key takes less than an afternoon. Replacement takes longer because each old lock must be uninstalled and each new one fitted, aligned, and tested. If the new lock is a different size or type, the door may need minor modifications to the bore hole or the latch plate.

That said, replacement gives you a fresh warranty and the latest security features. A new deadbolt from a reputable manufacturer comes with a guarantee that the pins, springs, and driver components are within spec. Rekeying does not extend the life of the lock; it only changes the keying. If the lock is ten or fifteen years old and the cylinder is showing wear, rekeying may buy you a year or two, but you will eventually need to replace it anyway. Many homeowners choose to replace the locks on the main entry doors and rekey the less-used side doors as a balanced approach.

What to check before deciding

Before you call a professional, take a close look at each exterior lock. Check the brand and model number stamped on the face or the rim of the cylinder. Look for signs of corrosion, rust, or a loose feel when you turn the key. Test the deadbolt throw: it should extend fully into the strike plate without sticking. If the lock feels tight and the key turns smoothly, rekeying is a

solid choice. If the lock feels gritty, the key wobbles, or the bolt does not align with the strike plate, plan for replacement.

Also consider the door itself. A damaged door frame or a soft strike plate undermines even the best lock. If the frame is split or the screws holding the strike plate are short, the lock upgrade will not matter until those parts are reinforced. In that situation, residential lock installation should include replacing the strike plate with a heavy-duty model that uses long screws into the framing. That is separate from the lock decision, but it affects overall security.

Working with a professional vs. doing it yourself

Rekeying requires a small set of tools and a supply of key pins, but it also requires practice. A DIY rekeying kit is available at hardware stores, and some homeowners manage it successfully on a single lock. The risk is that a misaligned pin or a dropped spring leaves the lock inoperative, and you then have to call a locksmith anyway. For someone with no experience handling lock cylinders, the time spent learning and fixing mistakes usually outweighs the money saved. Replacement is simpler in terms of skill: you unscrew the old lock and screw in the new one. But the new lock must match the door prep, and if it does not, you need a drill and a jig to enlarge or move the hole. That is not a job for someone who has never drilled a door.



A professional locksmith handles both rekeying and replacement quickly and can inspect the condition of the hardware as they work. For a company like qalocksmith.com, which serves Toronto and the GTA with mobile locksmith services including lock installation and rekeying, a single visit can cover all the exterior doors on a property. The locksmith brings the necessary cylinders, keys, and tools, and they can match new locks to an existing key if you plan to keep some hardware. That kind of convenience is the main reason most new homeowners choose to have the work done rather than attempt it themselves.

Making the call

Start with an honest assessment of the hardware you have. If the locks are in good condition and you just want to ensure that old keys no longer work, rekeying is the practical choice. It is fast, affordable, and lets you consolidate to a single key for all exterior doors. If the locks show wear, the security grade is low, or you want to move to a smart lock or a high-security deadbolt, replacement is the correct path. In either case, the goal is the same: you want to be the only person who controls access to your home. Once the work is done, you can hand out keys to family members, contractors, or a pet sitter with confidence, knowing that no stray copy from the previous owner still works.