

THE CALGARY FIRST-TIMER'S GUIDE

Your First Home.

A friendly start-to-finish guide for first-time buyers in Calgary — including FHSA, the RRSP Home Buyers' Plan, the federal tax credit, and the real costs no one warned you about.

YOUR CALGARY REALTOR®

Nadine Rife

587-777-6119 · www.nadinerife.com

A QUICK HELLO

Hi, I'm Nadine.

Helping you find home in YYC and beyond.



Nadine Rife · KIC Realty


I'm a Calgary REALTOR® with KIC Realty who believes buying a home should feel exciting, not overwhelming. My job is to translate the jargon, look out for the details that matter, and make sure you walk into your new place feeling confident about the decision you made.

Whether you're chasing a first place in the inner city, a forever home in the suburbs, or your first new build in a brand-new community, I'll be the steady hand at every step — from your first showing to the day you get the keys. I work with first-time buyers, growing families, downsizers, and investors all over the Calgary area.

MY PROMISE TO YOU

Clear answers, honest advice, and zero pressure. We move at your pace — not the market's.

How to reach me

 587-777-6119

 nadineriferealestate@gmail.com

 www.nadinerife.com

 KIC Realty

You can do this.

Buying your first home in Calgary feels overwhelming — until you have a calm, honest guide. That's what this is. We'll start with what most first-timers don't realize they have working in their favour.

You probably qualify for more help than you think

As a first-time buyer in Canada (and specifically Calgary), you have access to:

- FHSA — tax-deductible savings of up to \$40,000 just for a first home.
- RRSP Home Buyers' Plan — borrow up to \$60,000 from your own RRSP, tax-free.
- Federal First-Time Home Buyer Tax Credit — \$1,500 back on your tax return.
- GST Rebate — up to \$6,300 back on a qualifying new home.
- No provincial Land Transfer Tax — Alberta saves you thousands vs. BC or Ontario.

WHO COUNTS AS A 'FIRST-TIME BUYER'?

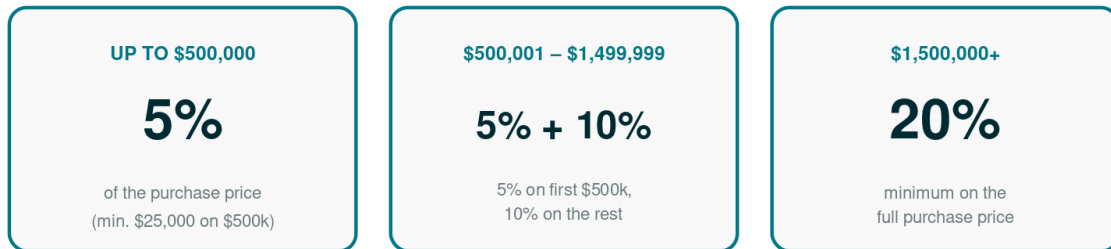
Federally, you (and your spouse/partner) haven't owned a home you lived in as your principal residence within the past 4 calendar years. So even if you owned years ago, you may still qualify today.

A friendly reality check

Your first home almost certainly won't be your forever home — and that's totally fine. The goal is to get on the ownership ladder, build equity, and trade up in 5–10 years. Almost every successful homeowner I know started with a 'good enough' first place.

Saving the down payment.

The single biggest barrier to homeownership for first-timers is the down payment. Here's how much you actually need.



Less than 20% down = insured mortgage (CMHC, Sagen, or Canada Guaranty) with an insurance premium added.

Calgary reality check

For a \$450,000 Calgary home (a realistic first-time buyer range), here's what your minimum down payment looks like:

- 5% down = \$22,500 + closing costs (~\$4,000) = about \$27,000 total
- 10% down = \$45,000 + closing costs (~\$5,000) = about \$50,000 total
- 20% down = \$90,000 + closing costs (~\$5,500) — no mortgage insurance needed

THE HIDDEN TAX ON SMALL DOWN PAYMENTS

Less than 20% down means CMHC (or Sagen / Canada Guaranty) insures your mortgage. That premium — usually 2.8% to 4% of the loan — gets added to your mortgage. On a \$400K loan that's \$11K–\$16K of extra debt. Not the end of the world, just plan for it.

Where the money can come from.

Your savings — boosted by the right accounts

The smartest first-timer strategy combines the FHSA and the RRSP Home Buyers' Plan. Together, you can deploy up to \$100,000 toward your first home — tax-deductible going in, tax-free coming out (or repayable, depending which one).

Family help — a 'gift letter'

It's totally normal for first-time buyers to get a gift from family for part of the down payment. Lenders need a signed gift letter from the giver confirming it's not a loan. Easy to do.

A note on co-signers

If your income alone isn't enough, a parent or family member can co-sign your mortgage. They're legally on the hook if you default — so this is a serious ask. Talk it through carefully.

Programs you may have heard about

FIRST-TIME HOME BUYER INCENTIVE

The federal 'shared equity' FTHBI program was discontinued in 2024. If you saw it in older articles, ignore — it no longer exists.

Your tax-smart combo.

This is the most important page in this guide. The FHSA and RRSP HBP are designed to work together — and most first-timers don't take full advantage.

FHSA

FIRST HOME SAVINGS ACCOUNT

\$8,000 / year

contribution room (lifetime \$40K)

Tax-deductible going in

like an RRSP — lowers your taxable income

Tax-free coming out

like a TFSA — no repayment needed

15-year window

to use it on a qualifying first home

RRSP HBP

HOME BUYERS' PLAN

Withdraw up to \$60,000

from your RRSP (per person)

Tax-free withdrawal

but it's a loan from your future self

Must repay over 15 years

starting in year 5 after withdrawal

Funds must sit 90+ days

in RRSP before withdrawal

How to actually use them.

The 'stack' — both accounts, working together

If you and a partner are both first-time buyers, you can each open an FHSA and each have an HBP. That's potentially:

MAXIMUM STACK — COUPLES

$\$40,000 \text{ FHSA} \times 2 = \$80,000$ — $\$60,000 \text{ HBP} \times 2 = \$120,000$ — Total deployable: up to \$200,000 — and the FHSA portion never has to be repaid.

A simple 4-step game plan

1

Open the FHSA today

Even with no money in it, opening starts the contribution-room clock. Unused \$8K of room rolls forward (up to \$8K, max \$16K stacked).

2

Contribute to FHSA first

Every dollar reduces your taxable income for the year — so you get a refund that you can re-invest. (No repayment ever required.)

3

Top up your RRSP next

Money must sit in RRSP for 90+ days before HBP withdrawal — so don't wait until the last minute.

4

Withdraw at the right time

Both withdrawals can happen within 30 days of taking possession. Your mortgage broker and lawyer will coordinate timing with your lender.

TAX TIP

Repaying your HBP starts in year 5. Mark a calendar reminder — if you miss a repayment year, that portion gets added to your taxable income.

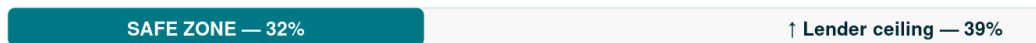
Pre-approval without the panic.

Pre-approval is just a lender telling you, 'based on what we see, here's the max we'd lend you.' It doesn't lock you in — but it tells you what's realistic.

What lenders look at

Gross Debt Service (GDS) — Max 32% (most lenders 39%)

Housing costs ÷ gross monthly income



Total Debt Service (TDS) — Max 40% (most lenders 44%)

Housing + all other debts (car, credit cards, student loans) ÷ gross monthly income



Even if you qualify at the higher ratios, the lower targets leave room for life — daycare, RRSPs, vacations, surprises.

Your credit score

To get the best rates you generally need a score of 680+. To qualify at all on an insured mortgage, you typically need 600+. If you're below that, we'll work on building credit for 3–6 months before applying.

The mortgage stress test

You have to qualify at either your contract rate + 2%, OR the federal benchmark rate (currently 5.25%), whichever is higher. This is meant to make sure you could handle rate increases.

Don't sabotage your own approval.

Between pre-approval and possession, please don't:

1. Change jobs (especially from salary to self-employed)
2. Take out new car loans or large credit purchases
3. Open new credit cards or close old ones
4. Co-sign anyone else's loan
5. Move large unexplained sums between accounts
6. Miss any bill payments — even a parking ticket can ding your score

TRUE STORY

A first-time buyer client of mine bought a \$40K car the week before closing. Her debt-service ratio shot up, the bank pulled her approval, and she lost the home. Wait until after possession for big purchases.

Bank vs. broker — pick the right one

Bank




- One-stop convenience
- You see their products only
- Good if you have a long relationship

Mortgage broker (often better for first-timers)

- Shops dozens of lenders
- Often sharper rates & terms
- Helps with credit prep
- Paid by the lender, not you

Finding your first place.

For most Calgary first-timers, the question is: condo, townhouse, or detached starter home? Each has trade-offs. Here's the honest breakdown.

 Condo / Apartment	 Townhouse	 Detached starter
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• \$200K–\$400K typical• Lowest entry price• Less maintenance (exterior, snow)• Condo fees add monthly cost• Special assessments can sting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• \$300K–\$550K typical• Often has fees but lower• Some yard, less maintenance• Family-friendly• Watch for Poly-B + reserve fund	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• \$450K–\$700K typical• Full ownership, no fees• Yard, garage, basement• All maintenance on you• Best long-term appreciation

Where first-timers are buying in Calgary

Affordable starter communities (varies, but consistently popular with first-timers):

- NE — Saddle Ridge, Skyview Ranch, Cornerstone, Martindale
- NW — Sherwood, Kincora, Evanston, Sage Hill
- SE — Copperfield, Walden, Legacy, McKenzie Towne
- SW — Bridlewood, Silverado, Shawnessy, Belmont
- Inner-city condos — Bridgeland, Beltline, Kensington (consider walkability vs. fees)

Condo fees — the real talk.

Condo fees aren't bad — they just need to be understood. They cover things you'd otherwise pay separately, plus a reserve fund for big future repairs.

What's typically included

- Exterior maintenance (roof, siding, paint)
- Snow removal & landscaping
- Building insurance (you still need contents insurance)
- Common-area cleaning & utilities
- Reserve fund contributions for big-ticket repairs
- Sometimes water, heat, parking, gym, party room

Red flags in condo docs

WATCH FOR

Underfunded reserve fund — if the fund is at 50% of the recommended target, you're looking at a future special assessment. Recent special assessments — what's been billed in the past 5 years? Pending legal action — board lawsuits, builder disputes, etc.

Polybutylene plumbing

Many Calgary condos and townhomes built 1985–1997 have Poly-B plumbing, which insurers and lenders may flag. It's not necessarily a no-go, but plan for eventual replacement (\$8K–\$20K). I'll always check before we go firm.

Writing & winning your offer.

You found it. Now the nerves kick in. Here's how I help first-timers stay calm and competitive — even in multiple-offer situations.



DEPOSIT TIMING

Typically due within 24–48 hours of conditions being removed (firm sale).
Paid by certified cheque / bank draft to the listing brokerage trust account.
Held in trust until closing — then applied to the purchase price.

Things that win without going crazy on price

7. Shorter, cleaner condition period (7 days vs. 10)
8. Larger deposit shows commitment
9. Flexible possession date for the seller
10. Fewer 'wish list' inclusions to negotiate over
11. Pre-approval letter from a known Calgary lender attached

IMPORTANT

Never skip the home inspection condition on your first home. Ever. No deal is worth a \$30K surprise three months in.

Conditions & inspection.

Your offer is accepted 'subject to conditions.' You typically have 7–14 days to verify everything. This is where I earn my keep on your first home.

The first-timer condition checklist

- 12. Financing — final lender review of the specific property & final approval
- 13. Home Inspection — 2–4 hours; please attend, you'll learn so much
- 14. Condo Document Review — if buying condo or townhouse (200+ pages)
- 15. Insurance — get a quote to confirm you can insure it before going firm
- 16. Title Search — your lawyer confirms no liens or registered issues

Don't panic at the inspection report

Every home — even a brand-new one — will have items on the report. We separate them:

Just life

- Filters need replacing
- Minor caulking
- Cosmetic cracks

Worth negotiating

- Old roof / furnace
- Poly-B plumbing
- GFCI outlets missing

Walk-away

- Structural issues
- Mould or moisture
- Major foundation movement

Insurance for first-timers.

The three types you need

Property (homeowner) insurance

Required by your lender. Must be in place BEFORE possession. Covers structure, contents, and liability. Budget \$80–\$200 / month depending on coverage and home age.

Mortgage default insurance (CMHC, Sagen, etc.)

Only if your down payment is < 20%. Protects the LENDER (not you) if you default. The premium is rolled into your mortgage.

Title insurance

One-time policy your lawyer arranges. Protects against title fraud, boundary issues, undisclosed liens. Cheap insurance for big peace of mind.

Mortgage life / disability insurance — be careful

MY HONEST TAKE

Lenders almost always offer 'mortgage protection insurance.' It's often more expensive and less flexible than a personal term life policy. Get quotes both ways before signing anything at the bank.

Closing day & the keys.

Conditions are removed, you're firm, and now the lawyers and lenders take over. About 1–2 weeks before possession, you'll be busy.

10 days before possession

17. Sign mortgage documents with your lender
18. Visit your lawyer (1–2 hours) and sign closing documents
19. Bring certified cheque or bank draft for down payment + closing costs
20. Bring two pieces of ID (one photo)
21. Activate property insurance — provide proof to your lender
22. Set up utilities for possession day (ENMAX, ATCO, City of Calgary)
23. Book movers — they fill up fast around month-end
24. Forward your mail with Canada Post

Possession day timeline

25. Morning — lawyers exchange funds and registration takes place
26. ~Noon-ish — keys are released (usually via lockbox or seller drop-off)
27. You and I do a final walk-through together
28. You walk in. You're a homeowner. 🎉

TREAT YOURSELF

Order a pizza, sit on the floor, and just feel it. The boxes can wait.

First-timer tax breaks & rebates.

Don't leave this money on the table. As a first-time buyer, here's what you can claim:

Item	Description	Estimate
Down Payment	5% on first \$500K, 10% above	\$22,500 – \$40,000
CMHC Premium (insured)	Added to mortgage if < 20%	\$13K – \$19K added
Closing Costs	Lawyer, inspection, title, etc.	\$3,000 – \$5,000
Federal First-Time HB Tax Credit	Non-refundable, line 31270	\$1,500 back
FHSA	Up to \$40K lifetime	up to \$40,000
RRSP HBP	Up to \$60K per buyer	up to \$60,000
GST Rebate (new builds only)	On new homes under \$450K	up to \$6,300
Calgary Property Tax (annual)	~0.65% assessed value	~\$3,250/yr on \$500K

QUICK ACTION LIST – FIRST-TIMER BENEFITS

1. Claim the \$1,500 Federal FTHB Tax Credit on your next tax return (line 31270). 2. Apply for the GST New Housing Rebate at closing if your new build is under \$450K. 3. Confirm your FHSA / HBP withdrawals are properly documented for CRA. 4. Set up monthly TIPP for Calgary property taxes immediately so you avoid a lump sum in June.

Mistakes I see most often.

Mistake #1 — Maxing out the budget

Just because the bank approves you for \$X doesn't mean you should spend \$X. Aim for housing costs at 28–32% of gross income to leave room for life.

Mistake #2 — Skipping the inspection

Tempting in a hot market, never worth it on your first home. A \$500 inspection has saved my clients tens of thousands.

Mistake #3 — Falling in love with the show home, not the floorplan

Show homes have \$50K+ in upgrades. Make sure you love the BASE home you can actually afford.

Mistake #4 — Forgetting condo fees in the budget

\$400/month condo fees = roughly \$80K less of mortgage you can afford at today's rates. Factor them in.

Mistake #5 — Big purchases between offer & possession

New car, new furniture on credit, even cosigning for a friend — any of these can sink your mortgage approval.

Mistake #6 — Not using the FHSA

Even if you don't max it out, opening one starts the contribution-room clock. Most first-timers wish they'd opened theirs a year earlier.

First-timer FAQs.

How much do I really need in the bank to start looking?

For a \$450K home: about \$27K minimum. For a \$550K home: about \$35K minimum. That includes 5% down + closing costs + a small buffer.

Can I buy with my partner if only one of us is a first-time buyer?

Yes — but only the qualifying partner can use the FHSA. Both can use the HBP if both have RRSPs, even if only one is a 'first-timer.'

How long is a pre-approval good for?

Usually 90–120 days, with a rate hold. You can usually renew it once if you're still looking.

What credit score do I need?

600 minimum for an insured mortgage; 680+ for best rates. If you're below 600, focus on credit-building for 3–6 months before applying.

Should I buy now or wait?

If your finances are stable and you'll be in the home 3+ years, the math usually favours buying. Trying to time the market perfectly almost never works.

STILL NERVOUS?


That's totally normal. Most first-time buyers I work with are nervous — and most are great homeowners within a year. The fact that you're reading guides instead of winging it tells me you're ready.

Let's find your **home.**


When you're ready to start — whether that's tomorrow or six months from now — I'd love to help. No pressure, no hard sell. Just a friendly chat to figure out what's right for you.

Nadine Rife

Calgary REALTOR® · KIC Realty

 587-777-6119

 nadineriferealestate@gmail.com

 www.nadinerife.com