

Is your home damp?

Simple information from Southampton City council to help you keep your home dry.

Is your home damp?



Damp can cause mould on walls and furniture and make window frames rot. Damp cold housing encourages the growth of mould and mites, as mites feed on moulds and can increase the risk of respiratory illnesses in some people. Some damp is caused by condensation. This article explains how condensation forms and how you can keep it to a minimum, so reducing the risk of dampness and mould growth.

You will need to take proper steps to deal with the condensation, but meanwhile there are some measures you can take right away. Wipe down the windows and sills every morning. Wring out the cloth rather than drying it on a radiator. Condensation channels and sponge strips can be bought at DIY shops. They are fitted to windows to collect the condensation and thus help prevent window frames from rotting and avoid damp forming under sills. Care must be taken to fit these devices properly. First treat the mould already in your home. If you deal with the basic problem, mould should not reappear. To kill and remove mould, wipe down walls and window frames with a fungicidal wash which carries a Health and Safety Executive 'approval number'. Follow the manufacturer's instructions precisely. Dry-clean mildewed clothes, and shampoo carpets. Disturbing mould by brushing or vacuum cleaning can increase the risk of respiratory problems. After treatment redecorate using a good quality fungicidal paint to help prevent mould. Note that this paint is not effective if overlaid with ordinary paints or wallpaper. When wallpapering, use a paste containing a fungicide to prevent further mould growth. The only lasting way of avoiding severe mould is to eliminate dampness.

First steps against MOULD

- First treat any mould you may already have in your home. If you then deal with the basic problem of condensation, mould should not reappear.
- To kill and remove mould, wipe down walls and window frames with a fungicidal wash which carries a Health and Safety Executive 'approval number' Follow the manufacturer's instructions precisely. Dry-clean mildewed clothes and shampoo carpets. Disturbing mould by brushing or vacuum cleaning can increase the risk of respiratory problems.
- After treatment, redecorate using a good quality fungicidal paint to help prevent mould recurring. Note that this paint is not effective if overlaid with ordinary paints or wallpaper. The only lasting way of avoiding severe mould is to eliminate dampness, and the conditions which have caused the problem.

What is CONDENSATION?

There is always some moisture in the air, even if you cannot see it.

If the air gets colder, it cannot hold all the moisture and tiny drops of water appear on cold surfaces. This is condensation. You notice it when you see your breath on a cold day, or when the mirror mists over when you have a bath.

Condensation occurs mainly during cold weather, whether it is raining or dry, It does not leave a 'tidemark'. It appears on cold surfaces and in places where there is little movement of air. Look for it in corners, on or near windows, in or behind wardrobes and cupboards. It often forms on north-facing walls.

Is it CONDENSATION?

Condensation is not the only cause of damp. It can also come from:

- Leaking pipes, wastes or overflows
- Rain seeping through the roof where a tile or slate is missing, spilling from a blocked gutter, penetrating around window frames, or leaking through a cracked pipe

- Rising damp due to a defective damp-course or because there is no damp-course
These causes of damp often leave a 'tidemark'.

If your home is newly built it may be damp because the water used during its construction (for example, in plaster) is still drying out.

If your home is damp for any of these reasons it may take weeks of heating and ventilation to dry out. Hiring a dehumidifier will help.

If you do not think the damp comes from any of these causes, then it is probably condensation.

How to avoid CONDENSATION

These four steps will help you reduce the condensation in your home.

1. Produce less moisture

Some ordinary daily activities produce a lot of moisture very quickly.

Cooking: To reduce the amount of moisture, cover pans and do not leave kettles boiling.

Paraffin and portable flueless bottled-gas heaters: These heaters put a lot of moisture into the air – one gallon of gas or paraffin produces about a gallon of water. If you have a problem with condensation, try to find alternative means of heating.

Washing clothes: Put washing outdoors to dry if you can. Or put it in the bathroom with the door closed and the window open or fan on. It is best to fit a fan that can be switched to run continuously for clothes drying. If you have a tumble dryer make sure you vent it to the outside (unless it is the self-condensing type). DIY kits are available for this.

2. Ventilate to remove the moisture

You can ventilate your home without making draughts. Some ventilation is needed to get rid of moisture being produced all the time, including that from people's breath. Keep a small window ajar or a trickle ventilator open all the time if possible, and especially when someone is in the room. You need much more ventilation in the kitchen and bathroom when cooking, washing up, bathing and drying clothes. This means opening the windows wider. Better still, use a humidistat-controlled electric fan (these come on automatically when the air becomes humid and are very cheap to run).

Close the kitchen and bathroom doors when these rooms are in use even if your kitchen or bathroom has an extractor fan. It will help to draughtproof these doors. Doing this will help stop the moisture reaching other rooms, especially bedrooms, which are often colder and more likely to get condensation. Allow space for the air to circulate in and around your furniture. Open doors to ventilate cupboards and wardrobes. Leave space between the backs of wardrobes and the wall. Where possible, position wardrobes and furniture against internal walls, i.e. walls which have a room on both sides, rather than against outside walls. When you have a curtain or blind drawn, it makes the surface of the window cooler and increases condensation, especially with single glazed windows. Trickle ventilators can help reduce the problem. If you replace your windows at any time, make sure they are double glazed and fitted with trickle ventilators.

3. Insulate and draughtproof

Insulation in the loft, cavity wall insulation and draughtproofing of windows and outside doors will help keep your home warm and you will have lower fuel bills as well. When the whole home is warmer, condensation is less likely.

- insulate the loft.
- draughtproof windows and external doors.

- consider cavity insulation.
- consider secondary glazing.
- find out if you are eligible for a grant or other help.

When draughtproofing:

- Do not block permanent ventilators.
- Do not completely block chimneys (leave a hole about two bricks in size and fit a louvred grille over it).
- Do not draughtproof rooms where there is a fuel burning heater (e.g. gas fire) or cooker.

4. Heat your home a little more

In cold weather, the best way to keep rooms warm enough to avoid condensation is to keep low background heating on all day, even when there is no one at home. This is very important in flats and bungalows and other dwellings where the bedrooms are not above a warm living room. If you have central heating set it to provide background warmth in all rooms including unused rooms. Otherwise install suitable thermostatically controlled heaters where necessary (do not use paraffin or flueless bottled gas heaters for this purpose). The thermostats will help control heating and costs. Remember to provide background ventilation at the same time. Dehumidifiers will help dry out damp in newly built houses. They can also help reduce condensation but they are of limited use in cold damp rooms. If you live in a house, insulating your loft is a cost-effective way of cutting heating costs. Remember to draughtproof the loft hatch but do not block any eaves ventilation. Cavity wall insulation is also an effective way of cutting heating costs, and insulation is available at subsidised prices, or if you are on benefits or over 70, free. Some older properties, however, are built without suitable cavities. Secondary glazing of windows reduces heat loss and draughts but you must ensure that there is some ventilation and adequate means of escape in an emergency such as a fire. Remember that any alteration to your windows, including their replacement, must meet the current Building Regulations requirements. You should consult the council on the need for building regulations or planning approval before any work is undertaken.

If you are a householder who receives an income-related benefit or Disability Living Allowance, or if you are a householder over 60, you may be able to get a grant of up to £3500 for heating, draughtproofing, cavity and loft insulation under the Warm Front Scheme. For information on grants under the Warm Front Scheme, contact: EAGA Partnership Ltd, Freepost NEA 12054, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE2 1BR. Telephone 0800 316 2814 (Mon-Fri 8am – 6pm)

If you are an owner-occupier or private tenant you may be eligible for financial assistance for works to cure damp and improve ventilation and heating. Contact the City's Private Sector Housing section on 8083 2606 to find out more about this.

If you are a council or housing association tenant and have problems with damp or condensation you should approach your landlord direct.

For advice and help on insulation and heating contact Your Energy Advice Centre, Freephone Number 0800 512 012, or the city council's Energy Efficiency Officer on 8083 4236.