



Is your home damp?

Damp conditions can cause mould on walls, furniture and make wooden 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.

In a significant number of enquiries, regarding damp homes reported to the Private Sector Housing team at the council, condensation is the main issue. This leaflet 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 down a drain, rather than drying it on a radiator, (as this will just put the moisture back in the property).

Condensation channels and sponge strips can be bought at DIY shops. They can be 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 any 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. These are readily available in supermarkets and shops selling cleaning products. Follow the manufacturer's instructions precisely.

Dry-clean mildewed clothes, and shampoo affected carpets, (dry thoroughly afterwards).

Caution: Disturbing mould by brushing or vacuum cleaning can increase the risk of respiratory problems in some people.

After treatment redecorate walls and ceilings using a good quality fungicidal paint to help prevent mould. Note that fungicidal 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.

Other sources of damp in the home

Although condensation is by far the most common cause of damp, damp can also come from: Leaking pipes, wastes or overflows.

Rain seeping through the roof where a tile or slate is missing,
Problems with flat roofs or lead work around chimneys etc.

Rain water spilling from a blocked gutter,
Rain 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' clearly visible on affected plastered walls. If you suspect you have any of these problems, repairs will need to be carried out to remove the source of damp.

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

If your home is damp for any of these reasons it may take several weeks of active heating and ventilation to dry it out thoroughly. Hiring a "commercial quality/size" dehumidifier from a tool hire company may well help.

If you cannot find any evidence the damp comes from any of these building faults, it is probably a condensation issue.

Recognizing Condensation

There is always some moisture in the air, even if you cannot see it. As air gets colder it cannot hold as much moisture and tiny drops of water appear. This is condensation. You may 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 (October – March). It forms on cold surfaces, particularly in places where there is little movement of air. Look for mould marks in the corners of rooms, on or near windows, in or behind wardrobes and cupboards. It often forms on any north-facing walls. Condensation does not tend to leave a noticeable horizontal 'tidemark' on walls.

Dealing with 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.

1.1 Cooking: To reduce the amount of moisture, cover pans and do not leave boiling, any more than necessary.

1.2 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 in the bathroom 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. Note: even condensing tumble dryers will put quite a lot of moisture into the air, so they need to be in a room that has open windows, when in use.

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

2. Ventilate to remove the moisture

You can ventilate your home effectively without causing uncomfortable draughts. Some ventilation is needed to get rid of excess moisture from the home which is being produced all the time, especially when it is occupied. Keep a small window ajar or trickle ventilators open all of 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. Shutting the door will help to prevent excess 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 large items of furniture (do not position furniture tight against external walls). Open doors on cupboards and wardrobes, to ventilate them. Do not cram too many clothes into built in wardrobes (especially those on outside walls).

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 as they allow moist air to escape from the home. If you replace your windows at any time, make sure they are double glazed and fitted with trickle ventilators.

3. Insulate and draught-proof

Insulation in the loft, cavity wall insulation and draught-proofing 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. However, do bear in mind that some ventilation is required in combination with warmth, so ensure that some small controlled ventilation is left open in all rooms which are occupied.

When draught-proofing: ***Do not block permanent ventilators (this could be dangerous, especially if there are gas appliances in use in the home).***

Do not completely block chimneys (leave a hole about two bricks in size and fit a louvred grille over it).

Do not draught-proof rooms where there is a fuel burning heater (e.g. gas fire) or cooker.

Do not draught-proof windows in the bathroom or kitchen.

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 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 flue-less 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.

If you live in a house, insulating your loft is a cost-effective way of cutting heating costs.

Remember to draught-proof the loft hatch but do not block any eaves ventilation.

Cavity wall insulation is also an effective way of cutting heating costs. Many properties, however, are built without suitable cavities. If you are in doubt, you should seek the advice of a building professional.

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 relevant requirements of the Building Standards Regulations.

You should consult your local authority regarding any planning or building regulation requirements before any significant works are undertaken.