

# Maintaining Your Home

Most of us try to take care of ourselves. We try to watch what we eat. We try to lose weight. We try not to overindulge (drinking, eating). We see our dentist and doctor on a regular basis..... all because we want to be healthy.

Your home needs to be “cared for” as well. Just like our bodies, our homes also deteriorate with age. And unless you take care of your home, it will tend to fall apart.

Too often, I have seen “catastrophes” that have occurred in peoples’ homes. And most of them could have been avoided if only some simple maintenance had been done on the house throughout the years. This handout is designed to offer you some tips and ideas on how to maintain your home and avoid having a catastrophe.

## Outside

It’s always amazing to me how few of my customers ever really look at and observe the outside of their houses. You may see the garage door go up as you drive up the driveway, and you may notice the front door, or that the lawn was recently mowed. But you might be surprised at how many things you can discover simply by walking completely around the outside of your house and observing it from the roof to the ground.

Stand back and look at the **roof**. Do you notice any shingles missing? Are any of the shingles rippled or cupped? This is the sign of an aging roof that needs replacing.

Especially important are the **gutters**. Are there leaves and twigs sticking out of them? Most people think it’s only necessary to clean the gutters once a year in the fall. But in reality, your gutters and downspouts should be cleaned at least 3-4 times a year -- spring, summer, early fall and late fall. There’s a tremendous amount of seeds, twigs and other debris that fall from the trees and clog the gutters throughout the spring and summer.

Clogged gutters are the primary reason people get water in their basements. During a hard rainstorm, clogged gutters don’t allow the water to flow down and away from the house. Instead, they fill up, overflow and the water runs down the sides of the house making its way down along the foundation wall and into the basement.

During your walk around the house, it’s important to observe the condition of the **paint**. Is it cracked or peeling? This is not only unsightly to look at, but also can allow the wood to rot if you don’t have it properly sanded, primed and painted.



Or are the sides of the house (especially the north side) dirty or moldy? This can be alleviated by simply **power washing** the walls. The same holds true with your concrete walkway, driveway or concrete patio. A good power washing does wonders for the looks of things. Trimming back bushes from the wall of the house will help keep the mold from returning as easily.

How about the condition of the **bricks, stone and mortar** that holds them in place? If there are cracks or missing mortar, you may need to have tuckpointing work done. This is especially important if you have a fireplace chimney.

What's the condition of your **windows**? Do they open and close tightly so the outside air (hot or cold) doesn't come into the house? Is the molding around the windows or the window sill rotting or need painting?

Do you have a wood **deck**? It is very important to power wash and stain (or paint) a deck at least every 2-3 years in order to make it last longer and safer to walk on. Be sure to notice, are there any loose or "soft" boards that sink in? These should be replaced sooner rather than later. Putting your foot through a rotten board is an easy way to break a leg.

It's also very important to always disconnect your **garden hoses** in the fall and leave them disconnected until at least April. If you leave them connected through the winter, the water inside the hoses and the wind-up reel will not only freeze and damage them, but very often the spigot and the pipe that runs into the wall of the house will also freeze and crack the pipe. When it thaws, you'll have a huge mess on your hands with water gushing inside the wall. I've seen this happen many times. Don't let it happen to you.

And don't forget the **window wells**. These are extremely important to keep clean because this is the most common area where unwanted rain water comes into a basement. If your house was built correctly, every window well has a drain in the bottom of it that connects into the drain tiles around the perimeter of your house. But when this drain gets covered over with leaves and debris, just like the gutters, there's no place for the water to go. The well fills up just like an aquarium, and the water can pour into your basement. These should be cleaned out at least twice a year.

In addition to keeping the window wells cleaned out, **window well covers** are a must: 1) to help prevent rain water, leaves and debris from going into the well, and 2) for safety reasons so a child or pet doesn't fall in and injure themselves. The covers come in a variety of sizes and are very simple to install.

If you know your gutters and window wells are clean and you still get water in your basement when it rains, look at the ground where it meets the foundation wall of the house. Ideally the ground should be higher next to the concrete foundation and slope downward away from the house. Often times, if the ground is flat or even slopes toward the house, water will collect in these low spots and seep down the foundation wall and into the basement. Filling in these low spots with dirt so the water will flow away from the house will often be the solution to preventing water in the basement.

Another important thing to look for are **gaps and holes** (especially around pipes) where mice and insects can get into your house. Stuffing these holes with course steel wool will stop the mice, and filling the small gaps with caulk or wood putty will stop the insects.

If your house has wood siding, check for woodpecker holes, especially up high. These must be filled in as soon as possible to prevent major damage to the walls.

Be sure your **dryer vent** is clean. This is simply a matter of brushing away all the lint that sticks to the exterior flap and inside the vent pipe. If this cover flap doesn't open and close freely, cold air can get into your house as well as rodents.

Lastly, check your **outside lights**. Are there bulbs burned out that need replacing? Is the timer that turns them on and off set properly, or do they just stay on all hours of the day and night?

## **Inside**

Now lets examine things inside your house. First lets talk about **PLUMBING**. The most important thing you should know is where the **main shut-off valve** is to your house. In most cases it will be in the basement near the foundation wall that faces the street (front of the house). Many houses have a crawl space you have to climb into to get to the shut off valve. This is a pain to get to, but you must know where this is in case of an emergency.

By knowing where your main shut off valve is, you can avoid a disaster next time you discover a toilet that's overflowing, or a dishwasher or clothes washer that's spewing water everywhere, or your hot water tank that's leaking all over the floor. No matter how many bathrooms or sinks you have in your home, they are all supplied by water that comes through that one main valve. If you shut that main valve off.....you've shut all the water to your house off.

Do you ever go away for an extended time (vacation) especially during the winter? One of the smartest things you can do is to shut the water off to your house right before you leave. After you've shut the main valve off, go turn on 2 or 3 faucets around the house to relieve the pressure that's still in the pipes. By turning on these 2 or 3 faucets, you will also confirm that you in deed turned the main water all the way off. In doing so, you can have the peace of mind that if your furnace stops working and your pipes inside your house were to freeze.....absolutely nothing wrong will happen while you are gone. There's no water that can flood your house. Turning off the water is such a simple thing to do. And it can prevent huge disasters from happening.

Another smart thing to do when you leave the house for an extended time is to turn down the thermostat on your hot water tank. If you are gone for a month, or even just a week, why would you continue to burn the natural gas required to heat your water when no one is using it? You'll save some money on your next gas bill while helping to "save the environment." You probably already remember to leave the thermostat to your furnace turned down to 62 degrees while you're gone. Why not turn down the thermostat to your hot water tank, too?

Next to keeping your gutters and window wells clean, without a doubt the most important thing to keep water out of your basement is to maintain your **sump pump**. We drive our cars every day. We open the refrigerator several times a day. It's easy to know immediately if our cars or refrigerators aren't working. But a flooded basement is no way to find out your sump pump isn't working. Most people never think to check out the sump pump to make sure it's in proper working order.

All you have to do is take a flashlight and "look" down inside the sump pump pit. You should see some water in the pit. This is normal. But the water level should be about 1 1/2 - 2 feet below the floor level of the basement. If the water level is up near the top of the pit (within six inches of the floor) you've got a problem. The pump probably isn't working and should be replaced immediately.

A good way to make sure the pump is working is simply to fill the pit up with water. Use a garden hose or pour several buckets of water into the pit until the pump automatically kicks on. Then you'll know.

In addition to the main sump pump, many people have a battery operated "back up" sump pump. This can easily be tested by leaning down and gently lifting up on the float. Or often times there's a "test" button on the battery case that will turn on the back up pump. And don't forget to check the water level in the battery. A dead battery will do you no good if the electricity goes out.

And if you really want to play it safe, purchase and install a "flood alert" which sits on the basement floor near the sump pit. It works like a smoke detector and sets off a loud beep if it senses any water.

One of the most common problems I see with **faucets** is that after years of use, they drip. This is bound to happen. The washers inside the hot and cold valves deteriorate over time and have to be replaced. This just happens with regular use. But it's an easy fix. Also, if you have faucets in your home that are hardly ever used (such as in a guest bathroom) be sure to turn them on and off several times a month just to run the water. Otherwise, mineral deposits can form over time making the faucet very sticky and hard to turn on and off.

Also keep in mind that every sink has a drain line underneath it where all the water goes. This U-shaped drain pipe (if it is metal chrome) will also deteriorate over time and will need replacing. It's a good idea to check under all of your sinks from time to time to see if there is any dripping in the cabinet below. I always replace these metal drain lines with white plastic drains (called PVC) because they will never deteriorate or rust.

NEVER, NEVER NEVER use a "Draino" or "Liquid Plumber" type product down your drains if they clog. This stuff is very toxic and can burn you severely, especially if it were to accidentally splash in your eyes. It also can be harmful to your pipes..... regardless of what it says on the label. I've seen first hand the damage this stuff does to the drain lines. So if you get a clog, the best thing is to take the pipe apart and clean it by hand. It can be a gross job, but it's the right way to fix the problem.

In your kitchen sink, please don't treat your **garbage disposal** like a waste basket. Only water based foods like fruit and vegetable peelings should go down the disposal. Egg shells are OK, too. The most important thing is to always run the faucet at full blast so plenty of water can flush the food on down the drain.

Never put things like pasta, cooking oil or grease, bones, meat or skin, potting soil, coffee grounds or anything else that's solid down your disposal.....unless you want to call me because you've clogged it up! The disposal and drain pipes aren't made to handle solid things like this. So use good judgement with what you grind up and flush down the disposal.

**Toilet** problems are a very common thing. But they are also very simple to fix. Usually if the toilet keeps running and running after you flush it, the flap or the fill valve need replacing. I do this all the time. And if the bowl gets completely stopped up..... never flush it a second time. The bowl will simply overflow and you'll have a real mess on your hands.

A plunger will often work. But try to pull the clog up with the plunger by gently pushing down on the plunger and then pulling up hard on it. Pushing down hard on the plunger can sometimes make the problem worse by compacting the clog.

Make sure the water in the bowl goes down before you flush it again. There's usually a shut off valve on the wall directly underneath the toilet tank that you can use to turn the water off to the toilet in case of an emergency. But since this rarely happens, the valve can be very hard to turn or be "frozen." Don't wait to find this out when your bathroom is flooding. Better to go around your house and test the toilet shut off valves by turning them on and off a couple of times to make sure they're in good working order.

One other "pipe" that needs attention is your **main sewer** drain line. The small drains from your sinks, tubs and toilets all merge into one large (four inch in diameter) main sewer line. This is typically located in the basement. While this pipe is large enough to handle just about anything that goes down the individual drains from the house, tree roots often work their way into this underground sewer line and cause it to clog.

You should have a plumber rod out this sewer line every 2-3 years, especially if you have trees growing over where the line runs out toward the street. Pouring a granular "root kill" product down the toilet at least once a year can also be a good preventative.

Next let's go over some **ELECTRICAL** issues. Just like your main water shut off valve, you should know exactly where your **main circuit box** is located. This is a large metal box mounted to the wall either in your basement or your garage.

Inside the circuit box are many (20-40) individual circuit breakers that each control the flow of electricity to specific parts of your house. Often times a circuit breaker will trip (shut off) when too many appliances (hair dryers, Toast R Oven, microwave) are running at once. Resetting a circuit breaker is just like turning on a light switch. Once you've located the tripped breaker, shut it all the way to the off position, and then switch it back on. Everything should then be back to normal. Just don't use several appliances at once.

And if you ever have a dead **outlet**, plug in a radio to it with the volume turned up. That way when you go check the circuit breakers, you'll know the outlet is back on (when you hear the radio) without having to go back and forth from the circuit box.

If you do try by yourself to replace a light switch or receptacle (plug or outlet), ALWAYS ALWAYS turn off the circuit breaker first before you try to remove the switch or receptacle. Getting shocked is not a pleasant experience! Safety is very important when working with electricity. Be careful!

I'm a big believer in **dimmer switches**. They allow you to set the brightness at any level you want. They actually prolong the life of the light bulbs. And they can save you money on your electric bill.

Another little inexpensive luxury are **electronic timers**. It's comforting to come home to a well lit house (both inside and out) when no one's there. You don't have to remember to turn off the lights before going to bed because they turn off automatically. And when you're on vacation, your house has that "lived in" look so the would-be burglars will stay away.

**GFI Outlets** are commonly found in bathrooms, kitchens and garages.....where ever there's water near the outlet. They should be in every home (including yours) because they can save your life. They are designed to instantly shut off if an accident happens, like dropping a hair dryer in the sink.

It's a good idea to "test" all of the GFI outlets in your home at least once a year by pressing the test button, which trips the outlet, and then pressing the reset button.

The new **CFL (compact florescent light) bulbs**.....the curly Q bulbs.....are good to use in certain instances. They use less energy and they do last a lot longer than the regular incandescent light bulbs, but they also cost more to buy. It's best to use CFL bulbs in light fixtures that stay on continuously for a long time.....like the can lights in your ceiling or outdoor lights that stay on for several hours at night.

However, these CFL bulbs do not dim very well.....even the bulbs that are labeled "dimable." In situations where you're using a dimmer switch, it is best to use incandescent bulbs. And in situations where the lights are turned on and off several times a day, the CFL bulbs won't save much in energy use, and they often take several minutes to brighten up when you turn them on, which can be annoying.

Another big energy saver is the use of **ceiling fans**. Not only do they do a great job of circulating the air so you feel cooler in the summer, the same holds true if you use them in the winter when your furnace is on. Just remember to set the fan blades so they blow downward in the summer months. Flip the switch on the motor to reverse the fan direction in the winter so it gently circulates the warm air off the ceiling.

It's also very important to keep your **bathroom exhaust fan** clean. It collects lint just like your dryer vent does. This can cause the fan motor to overheat and die. The lint build-up also hinders the proper air flow out of the bathroom. Next time you hear your exhaust fan making a noise or hum, you probably don't need a new fan. It just needs to be cleaned.

Proper maintenance of your **furnace** and **air conditioner** are very important. You should have them serviced by a licensed technician every year. It's the best way to prevent a failure from happening when the weather is either miserably hot or cold. Don't forget to change or clean your **air filters** on a regular basis -- at least 3-4 times a year.

## **Other Issues**

A common problem I often see is water damage on the first floor ceiling.....caused by water from the bathroom directly above. When this happens, most people think they have a plumbing problem. But this is rarely the case. Usually there is never a problem with the pipes. The problem is from bad caulking that allows water to seep in between the tiles and the tub, or around the spout or on/off valves. **New caulking** nearly always solves the problem.... unless someone isn't keeping the shower curtain or door completely shut. Water that splashes outside the tub onto the floor will also seep through the floor to the ceiling below.

As long as we're on the subject of bathrooms, **grab bars** are a real good idea to help anyone of any age get into and out of the tub. Most accidents in a house occur in the bathroom, usually from people falling. A solid grab bar can be a good way of preventing that from happening.

And speaking of falling..... too often this is how many elderly people get hurt. Take a look around your house. Are there loose throw rugs that someone could slip on? These should be replaced with ones that don't slip. Are there loose newspapers, junk mail, or toys scattered around the floor? These should be picked up and put away so no one trips on them.

Another simple thing that gets overlooked is keeping the coils underneath your **refrigerator** clean. This area can get very dirty, especially if you have pets. In order to keep your fridge running efficiently, simply remove the grill at the bottom front and vacuum out the dust balls that have accumulated. Using a flashlight will help you to see this underneath area better. This should be done about once a year. But be careful you don't touch or damage the electrical wiring.

When is the last time you checked your **smoke detectors** and **carbon monoxide detectors**? Yes, they should "chirp" when you have a low battery. But don't count on this. If the battery is truly dead, the detector won't chirp, and you won't know if it is in working order or not. So press and hold that "test" button to make sure they work. Do this at least once a year. Also, if they are more than 10 years old, it's a good idea to replace them. The newer ones are much more reliable. These things can save your life!

A **fire extinguisher** in the kitchen could, too.

**Loose Screws** all over your home can be a major problem. Kitchen cabinet doors can fall on you if they aren't screwed in tightly. And that loose hand rail down the steps might give out some day if you don't tighten it. Doors that bump against the frame when you close them usually aren't because of a warped door. It's because the screws that hold the hinges aren't tight. And aren't those loose door and cabinet knobs annoying to you? Tightening the screws will make that problem go away.

Don't forget to **lubricate** things. A quick spray of WD-40 will make those hinges stop squeaking. And lubricating the rollers on your garage door will help them last longer. Be sure to spray the ball bearings inside the rollers.

And last but not least, it's a good idea to check your exterior doors to see that they have adequate **weatherstripping**. Cold air seepage around your doors makes your furnace work harder to keep the house warm. And this costs you money, not to mention the discomfort of a cold draft.

## **Summary**

The bottom line to taking care of your home is simply to **notice things**. Take the time to look around and observe things that could be potential problems. Just use your common sense, and ask yourself, "Is that a problem?" or "Are there some things I should do to make my home a safer or more energy-efficient place to live?"

If so, then be pro-active at getting all these small problems fixed now, instead of waiting until they become big problems down the road.

And please remember..... if you ever need help with fixing any of these problems around your house, give Dependable Bob a call!

In fact, start your "to do" list right here.....

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