waverley housing

Controlling Condensation in Your Home

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CONTENTS

What is condensation?

Condensation in your home is caused by warm, vapour laden air meeting a cold surface such as windows, mirrors, walls, cisterns and tiling etc. When the air cools, it can't retain the moisture, and some of it condenses into small droplets of water on these cold surfaces. You can see this happening on the bathroom mirror when the room is steamed up with hot water from a running bath or shower.

Modern features such as double glazing and loft insulation are important to keep our homes warm, but they can also cause problems associated with poor air circulation. Where there is inadequate ventilation, condensation and stale air can result.

With the relatively high cost of heating, we don't want to keep our windows open particularly when it's cold outside. So we need to minimise the problem as much as possible.

Steps to minimise condensation

1. When cooking, cover pans and avoid leaving kettles on the boil.

2. When washing clothes, wherever possible, it is better to dry your clothes outside. If this is not possible, put them in the bathroom, with the door closed and the bathroom fan on (if fitted), and leave the window open. If you have a tumble dryer, run the vent pipe outside (unless it is a self-condensing type). You can adjust the vent pipe to run outside, with a simple DIY kit.

3. It is important to make sure your home is properly ventilated. There will always be some moisture present in the home and you should have some form of ventilation available, often by air bricks (which must never be covered over).

4. When using the bathroom or kitchen, keep the door closed whenever possible. This will help to contain the moist or stale air in that room.

5. Where furniture such as cupboards are against the wall, try to keep a small distance between the back of the cupboard and the wall, particularly if the wall is generally cold, and some form of ventilation in any cupboard is a good idea, to keep the air circulating.

6. Whilst it is a good idea to draught proof your home, it is important to remember not to block airways that will prevent air circulating.
   - Don't block fixed ventilators such as air bricks or chimneys completely
   - Don't draught proof rooms where there is a problem with condensation or mould.
   - Don't draught proof kitchen or bathroom.

7. As we have already mentioned, it is cold air that causes the problems associated with condensation. Wherever possible, particularly in cold weather, you should try to keep your home warm with some form of background heating, even if you are not in the home. This applies in particular to bedrooms and especially in flats and bungalows.

Advice for Tenants

It is well known that, in recent years, some houses and flats have suffered from condensation. Walls and ceilings (and sometimes floors) become damp, and sometimes discoloured and unpleasant, as a result of mould growing on surfaces.

Why condensation occurs

Condensation occurs when warm, moist air meets a cold surface. The risk of condensation, therefore, depends upon how moist the air is and how cold the surfaces of rooms are. Both of these depend, to some extent, on how a building is used. In a room with a cold outside wall, it is quite normal for condensation to occur predominantly on the lower parts of the external walls, and this may be confused with rising damp.

How condensation occurs

Condensation can often be seen for short periods in bathrooms and kitchens because of the steam produced, and quite frequently for longer periods in unheated bedrooms. It is also seen in cupboards or corners of rooms where ventilation and movement of air are restricted. Along with condensation being visible on surfaces, damage can occur to materials which are out of sight - e.g. condensation in roofs/lofts.

What is important

Three things are particularly important:

- Prevent very moist air spreading to other rooms from kitchens and bathrooms, or from where clothes may be placed inside the property to dry following washing
- Provide some ventilation to all rooms, so that moist air can escape
- Use heating reasonably

How can you prevent condensation in your home

Reduce moisture content of room air

a) Good ventilation of kitchens when cooking (or washing and/or drying clothes) is essential. If there is an extractor fan, use it when cooking or washing clothes, and particularly whenever windows show any sign of misting. Leave the fan on until misting has cleared.

b) If the kitchen does not have an extractor fan, open the kitchen window and keep the doors to the rest of the property closed as much as possible, to prevent moisture going into other rooms.

c) Similar to the kitchen recommendations above, during and after bathing or showering, keep the extractor fan turned on or the bathroom window open, and shut the door for long enough to dry off the room.

d) In other rooms, provide at least some ventilation, even if only by leaving windows slightly open. In older properties, a lot of ventilation occurs through fireplace flues and draughty windows. In modern flats and houses, however, sufficient ventilation often does not occur unless a window is open (or an extractor fan is turned on) for a reasonable time each day or for the time a room is in use. In cold weather, it is appreciated that too much ventilation is uncomfortable and wastes heat. In these circumstances, all that is needed is a very slightly opened window or an extractor fan and, where there is a choice, open the upper part of the window and about ½ inch/1 cm gap will usually be sufficient.

e) Avoid the use of portable paraffin or flueless gas fires/heaters, as far as possible, because each litre of fuel used produces about the equivalent of a litre of liquid water in the form of water vapour. If these heaters must be used, it is essential that the room they are in is well ventilated.

f) If condensation occurs in a room which has a gas, oil or solid fuel heating appliance with a flue, the heating installation should be checked, as the condensation may have appeared because the appliance's flue has become blocked.

g) Do not use unventilated airing cupboards for drying clothes

h) If washing is put to dry, for example, in a bathroom of kitchen, open a window or turn on the extractor fan enough to ventilate the room. Do not leave the door open, or moist air will spread to other rooms, where it may cause problems.

i) Allow air to circulate behind furniture to avoid a build-up of stagnant air pockets leading to mould growths.

j) Consider the use of electrical dehumidifiers, e.g. in the living and sleeping areas.

Provide reasonable heating

a) Try to make sure that all rooms are at least partially heated. Condensation most often occurs in unheated bedrooms.

b) To prevent condensation, the heating has to keep the room surfaces reasonably warm. It takes a long time for the structure of a cold building to warm up, so it is better to have a small amount of heat for a long period, than a lot of heat for a short time.

c) Houses and flats left unoccupied and unheated during the day get very cold. Whenever possible, it is best to keep heating on, even if at a low level.

d) In houses, the rooms above a heated living room benefit to some extent from heat rising through the floor. In bungalows, and in most flats, this does not happen. Some rooms are especially cold because they have a lot of outside walls or lose heat through the roof, as well as the walls. Such rooms are most likely to have condensation, and some heating is, therefore, necessary. Even in a well insulated house and with reasonable ventilation, during cold weather, it is recommended that all rooms be maintained at not less than 10° C in order to avoid condensation. When living rooms are in use, their temperature ought to be raised to about 20°C.

Mould growth

Any sign of mould growth is an indication of the presence of moisture and, if caused by condensation, gives warning that heating, structural insulation or ventilation, or all three, may require improvement. It is recommended that mould growth is cleaned away by using a weak solution of household bleach or by the use of a commercial mould growth remover containing a fungicide.

New buildings

New buildings often take a long time before the materials used in their construction are fully dried out. While this is happening, they need extra heat and ventilation. Often during the first winter of use, many houses require more heat than they will need in subsequent winters.

Allowance should be made for this. It is important that wet construction should be free to dry out. In some forms of construction, especially flat roofs of concrete, final drying may only be able to take place inwards. Ceiling finishes which would prevent such drying out should not be added unless expert advice has been given that this would not be a problem.

Effect of increased ventilation on fuel burning appliances

If an occupier proposes to fix an extractor fan or otherwise change the ventilation in a room containing a gas or solid fuel appliance, he should obtain advice from the installer of the appliance about the risks from toxic fumes.

What to do if you are concerned about condensation/mould in your home

In the first instance you should contact the repairs team on 0800 104 105 who will arrange for an inspection of your home.

Further advice

For further advice, please contact the Environmental Health Department of Scottish Borders Council:

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