

Dampness, condensation and mould growth in housing

What this factsheet is for

This factsheet describes the kinds of dampness which occur in housing. It explains the difference between dampness caused by structural problems and condensation dampness. It gives advice about how each of these should be dealt with.

The factsheet applies to tenants living in private rented housing and to tenants of Housing Associations and other social rented housing providers.

What kinds of dampness?

Two different kinds of dampness occur in dwellings. They are:

- **Structural dampness**, which occurs where part of a dwelling's structure becomes defective. Dampness can enter through defects such as slipped slates, leaking gutters, faulty chimneys and perished brickwork. Rising dampness occurs where naturally- occurring ground moisture is drawn up through porous brick and stone walls.
- **Condensation dampness**, which occurs when warm, moist air inside a dwelling meets a cold surface (such as an external wall or the inside surface of a cupboard). The air cools at the contact point and the moisture in the air becomes a liquid. The colder the surface, the greater the likelihood of condensation. The moisture left on surfaces as a result of condensation will encourage mould growth.

House dust mites, and not mould, are the most common trigger of asthma and other allergies. House dust mites thrive where there is poor ventilation and warm, moist air (high humidity). These conditions can also lead to condensation dampness.

How can I tell which form of dampness is affecting my accommodation?

It is not always easy to tell, but here are some key differences:

Structural dampness tends to produce a defined damp stain. It can usually be linked with the building defect that has caused it: a well-defined damp patch on an outside wall in a room, for example, can be seen to result from perished brickwork on the wall's outer face. Rising dampness only affects ground floor/basement rooms and often shows as a "tidemark" on external walls and solid internal walls in contact with the ground. It typically only extends to a height of around 900-1000mm above the floor surface.

Condensation dampness is usually found in corners, in cupboards, behind furniture and under work surfaces - in fact wherever there is little air movement. It can often be seen as water droplets on windows or water pooling on window sills. It is often associated with mould that looks like 'black spots' and is typically found along skirting edges or ceiling edges. The mould can also occur on leather, suede and other natural materials and fabrics.

If you are not sure what is causing the damp in your home, start by checking pipes and overflows and under sinks to see if there are any obvious leaks. Have a look outside: you may be able to see if there are slates missing from the roof, cracked render or leaking gutters or rainwater pipes.

What can be done to deal with the dampness problem in my home?

This depends very much upon the type of dampness present.

Structural dampness can be cured by repairing the defect which allowed dampness to penetrate. Rising dampness can usually be dealt with by injecting a damp proof course into the affected walls. Re-plastering may also be required.

Condensation dampness can be much harder to deal with. This is because everyday living activities- cooking, boiling kettles, showering, clothes drying indoors- produce the warm, moist air which gives rise to condensation. The way you use your home affects the amount of condensation you get. You don't need to alter your habits dramatically - just bear in mind the following tips:

- Keep kitchen and bathroom doors shut, particularly when cooking, washing or bathing - otherwise moist air will spread right through the house and reach other (often cooler) rooms, such as bedrooms, where condensation could occur.
- When cooking put lids on pans to reduce the amount of steam and open kitchen windows. Don't allow kettles to boil any longer than necessary.
- The more moisture produced in your home, the greater the chances of condensation, unless there is adequate ventilation. Nobody likes draughts, but ventilation is essential.
- In winter open the windows a little, only as long as they are misted up. If you fit draught stripping, leave a space for a small amount of air to get through.
- Always use extractor fans when cooking or having a bath/shower.

What about heating?

You will get less condensation if you keep your home warm most of the time. Heating is expensive, but without it you are almost certain to get condensation. Here are some ways to use your heating effectively to reduce condensation:

- It is important that your heating system is checked regularly so that it works efficiently.
- Try to leave some gentle background heat on throughout the day in cold weather. Most dwellings take quite a long time to warm up, and it may cost you more if you try to heat it up quickly from cold in the evening.
- If you are struggling to pay for heating, ask your fuel supplier or your gas or electricity supplier about ways to spread the cost of fuel or consider switching to a cheaper supplier.

- Avoid using bottle gas or paraffin heaters. They are expensive to run and produce large quantities of water vapour which will make a condensation problem worse.

What else can I do to avoid condensation dampness?

- Avoid drying clothes indoors, particularly on radiators. This can increase condensation unless you open a window to allow air to circulate. If you have a tumble dryer, this must be vented to the outside.
- Don't overfill cupboards and wardrobes. Always make sure that some air can circulate freely.
- Move furniture away from outside walls to allow air to circulate.

What can the Council do to help me with my dampness problem?

First of all, please note that if you are registered on Devon Home Choice the presence of dampness will not have any effect upon your banding as the problem can be dealt with if the appropriate measures are taken.

The help that the Council can give depends upon the type of dampness present and what is causing it.

The City Council can use its legal powers to make landlords carry out the repairs needed to cure **structural dampness**.

The City Council can sometimes use these same powers to deal with **condensation dampness**. They can be used where, for example, loft insulation or the heating system is inadequate, or ventilation is very poor.

If you think your home is affected by structural dampness or serious condensation resulting from inadequate insulation, heating or ventilation, you should take the following steps:

Step 1

Using this factsheet, think about the kind of dampness present in your home. Consider whether it is structural dampness or condensation. If you think it is structural dampness, proceed to Step 2. If you think it is condensation dampness, consider the following:

- Is there a bathroom without a window that needs an extract fan?
- Are extract fans in working order?
- Are windows very draughty?
- Can you open windows properly to ventilate rooms?
- If the landlord has provided a tumble dryer is it vented to the outside?

- Is there a fixed heating system (i.e. gas boiler & radiators, or storage heaters) in good order, which heats all main rooms and is controlled by thermostat and timer?
- Is there at least 100mm of loft insulation (200mm if electric heating) and cavity wall insulation? *If not grants may be available to help. Call Exeter City Council on 01392 265651.*

Step 2

Report the defects to your landlord or letting agent, preferably in writing. Ask them to consider your concerns and let you know what action they will take. You will need to co-operate with any arrangements your landlord or agent makes to visit to examine the problem and carry out the work required. You should allow your landlord a reasonable time for the work to be done.

Step 3

If you do not receive a satisfactory response or the work is not being done, contact us again. We will make arrangements with you to call to examine the defects and discuss the action, if any, that we can take.

You need to be sure that you are willing for us to speak to your landlord. We will ask you for the details of your landlord or agent including how to contact them.

What would happen next?

An assessment of the property would be made to decide whether the conditions come within the housing law that we administer and are serious enough to require attention. Where any such defects are identified we will discuss with you the action we are legally able to take. In most situations we will approach your landlord on an informal basis first rather than taking formal enforcement action although this will depend upon the severity of the problem.

We can only help if the dampness is serious enough to mean that some medical treatment is likely in the next 12 months. In making this assessment we cannot take into account any medical conditions you or your children may have. This is because the assessment also needs to apply if there is a change of occupier.

As a rough guide, the dampness would need to be affecting the majority of rooms in your accommodation with large areas of damp plaster and associated mould growth.

If we judge that the problem results mainly from living practices within the home we will advise you of changes you can make to reduce condensation.

Our contact details: Private Sector Housing
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Examples of rising damp



Examples of condensation and related mould growth