

A wet basement doesn't have to be a deal breaker

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Offering extra bedrooms, in-law suites, offices, family rooms and workshops, the space below ground can be as valuable as the space above it when someone is buying a home. A finished basement or a promising unfinished basement can be a great selling feature. But what if it has moisture issues?

Basements are essentially holes in the ground and keeping the water out is a tricky business. With more severe rain storms, aging municipal infrastructure and increasing hard surfaces, there is often nowhere else for the extra water to go. Losses due to infiltration can range from a few thousand dollars up to \$100,000 depending on how extensively finished and furnished the basement may be.

Here are some tips for recognizing how water gets in to basements and what you can do to stop it. A wet basement doesn't have to be an automatic deal breaker.

The most obvious culprits are via plumbing or roof leaks. We've all experienced these but they are relatively easy and quick to fix. Recognize the signs via drips, water stains and crumbling plaster and call a plumber or roofer promptly.

Next is condensation. Poorly insulated homes may have condensation on cold walls where the heated air hits the cold surface. Because this is an ongoing situation, often mould is present. Check behind toilets, in cold rooms and on basement floors at the corners. If not too bad, the mould can be cleaned up using soap and water, and then adding insulation

and ventilation can prevent it from recurring. An energy audit can offer more explicit advice about this.

The nastiest is when sewage backs up into the house through the floor drain or other plumbing fixture. This often happens during heavy rains when municipal sewage systems become overwhelmed, but also can be caused by a blockage in the sanitary sewer lateral pipe. Common causes of blockage include tree roots, fats, oils, grease or other debris that is (but shouldn't be) flushed.

Though unpleasant and destructive, this type of damage may be covered by insurance, depending on your policy. A sewer backflow prevention device can be installed in the basement floor, preventing backups from occurring. Though somewhat pricey to retrofit into homes, (in the range of \$2,000 to \$3,000), the cost is much less than the losses that may occur in a flooded basement. Many cities offer subsidies for their installation.

Finally, when excessive rain or flood water comes through windows, cracks or other openings in the foundation wall, we call it infiltration. Look for water stains on the basement floor and walls. Often there is a faded ring around the external wall that is obvious in unfinished areas. Recent basement renovations are sometimes a cover-up for flooding. If the water heater, furnace and basement reno were all completed in the year of the flood, you need to ask the question. This type of water damage is not generally covered by insurance.

There may or may not be a quick fix for preventing infiltration, but some strategies can help:

- Redirect downspouts and rain barrel overflows to a permeable area at least eight feet away and down slope from the foundation.
- Regrade all areas (paved and landscaped) around the foundation to slope away.
- Repair and fill cracks or openings in the foundation wall.
- Install covers on window wells.
- Insulate and seal off cold rooms from heated space.

If it is not a quick fix, you should be able to identify it with the following clues:

- The house is the lowest on the street or lower than street level
- A reverse driveway (leading to an underground garage)
- The house has a fieldstone or masonry foundation that was designed to accommodate some moisture penetration (people buying century homes are usually prepared to deal with this)
- The house has paved areas that are sloped towards the foundation that can not be easily or immediately fixed (often patios and walkways that were installed improperly start to sink after a while and can lean towards the house)

If this is the case, but your client is still in love with the house, there are some things they can do to make life easier with a damp basement:

- Don't finish the basement
- Clean and dry up dampness as soon as possible (it only takes three days for mould to start forming)
- Store everything on shelves off the floor
- Remove damp items
- Avoid using absorbent finishes and furnishings
- Install a sump pump and make sure it has a backup power supply for power failures
- Keep a careful watch on eaves, downspouts and grading around the property and fix issues as they arise to ensure water keeps flowing away
- Call the home insurance company and add flood protection to the policy

Even small amounts of moisture, if not fixed or dried out promptly, can cause mould that is dangerous to human health and difficult to clean up if it gets beyond a certain amount. You should be able to smell it. It takes only a few days for mould to start growing so it is

important to act promptly to fix issues and dry things out quickly. Small areas can be cleaned up easily, but if mould is creeping behind walls and under flooring, it is best to call in professional help. On rare occasions occupants may already be experiencing health effects and should move out until remediation is complete.

By being open and pragmatic about basement dampness, infiltration and flood risk, your clients can enjoy their new home and avoid big headaches and finger-pointing later on.