

# The essential homeowners check- list

There's no getting around it. For most of us, our home is our single most valuable asset. But unlike traditional investments, which might appreciate even if you left them alone, a home requires regular attention and care if you want to protect its value. Here's a guide to smart moves you can make to safeguard your home, including tips on maintenance, insurance and taxes

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# how to maintain your home

## 1 Inspect your house.

If you're like most homeowners, the last time you had your home inspected was when you bought it. But home inspections aren't just for home buyers. If you want to catch small problems early, hire a home inspector every five years (cost: \$300 to \$500). "Unfortunately, there's a lot that can go wrong that you can't see, smell or hear," says Stephen Gladstone, the president of the American Society of Home Inspectors. "Mold and mildew, water problems, invisible gases—all those things can harm us and our home." To find a qualified home inspector, check with the American Society of Home Inspectors ([ashi.org](http://ashi.org)).

## 2 Start a maintenance log.

Record the date when each job is done so you know when to check for wear and damage. Also record the costs for each job and who did the repairs so you know whom to call if you have problems. If you do the work yourself, note the materials used and where you purchased them.

## 3 Make upkeep routine.

It should become a habit. Spring is a good time to do a comprehensive inventory of your house, particularly if you live in an area where the winter weather is harsh. See page 96 for a maintenance timeline.

## 4 Create a maintenance and repair fund.

How much you spend on maintenance and repairs depends on the age of your home, how it's been treated by previous owners, the climate you live in and how much you want to get out of it when you sell. One rough rule of thumb: Budget 1% to 3% of the home's value for annual repairs and maintenance. So if your home is worth \$200,000, set aside \$2,000 to \$6,000. (The older the home, the more maintenance it will need.)

## 5 Keep water out.

Water is the No. 1 cause of damage to homes. The penetration of moisture—vapor,

water or ice—can cause paint failure, mold, foundation problems and masonry cracks. Check regularly for leaks in the basement, particularly after storms or heavy rains. Remove debris from the roof and gutters so water doesn't back up and damage the exterior. Seal roof flashings to prevent leaks. Extend or install downspouts or splash blocks to prevent basement flooding, leaks and soil erosion. Put a dehumidifier in the basement to prevent condensation on the walls, especially in humid weather. Keep the unit clean to prevent mold.

## 6 Invest in better materials.

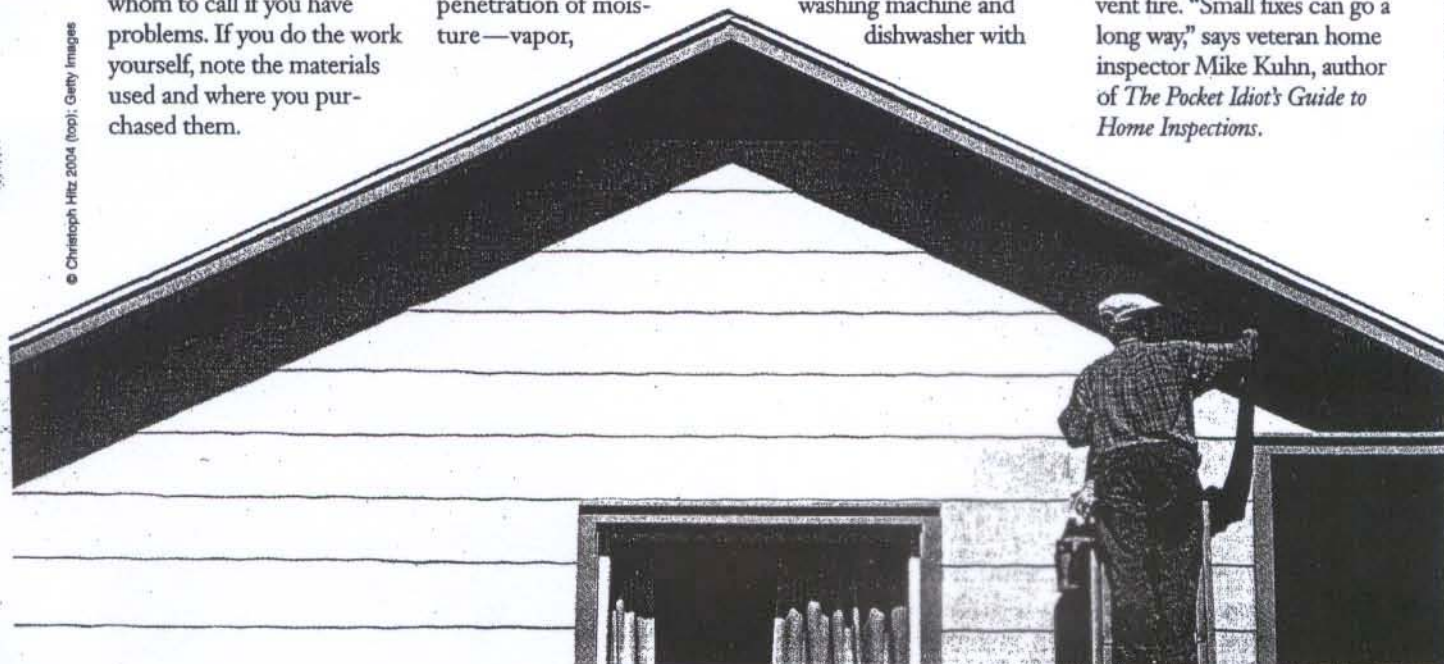
Using up-graded materials can reduce the amount and frequency of maintenance. For example, replacing water lines on appliances such as your washing machine and dishwasher with

stainless-steel hoses instead of rubber ones goes a long way in preventing floods. Water damage from burst pipes and appliances accounts for 20% of all insurance claims, says Jim Swegle, vice president of homeowners insurance at Safeco Insurance.

## 7 Do preventive fixes.

Install chimney caps to keep out rain and critters.

Caulk exterior trim, windows and doors to prevent leaks. Trim trees near the house and roof to prevent damage during storms or on windy days. Keep any wood exposed to weather painted and sealed to stop moisture penetration, which can lead to dry rot and termites. A \$20 gallon of waterproofing seal can save hundreds in deck repairs in the long run. Clean the kitchen exhaust fan and the clothes dryer vent to prevent fire. "Small fixes can go a long way," says veteran home inspector Mike Kuhn, author of *The Pocket Idiot's Guide to Home Inspections*.





# what to do and when

## every month

- ☐ Clean or change air filters for heating and cooling systems. Clogged filters make your heating and cooling system less efficient, driving up electricity bills.

## every spring and fall

- ☐ Check doors, windows and trim. Replace broken glass or damaged screens. Check glazed openings for loose putty and caulking at doors and windows and weather stripping for fit and damage.
- ☐ Clean out gutters and downspouts to prevent water from backing up and damaging your house.
- ☐ Inspect exterior walls, looking for cracks or loose joints in masonry, paint failure and damage or decay to siding and trim.
- ☐ Check roof for damaged or loose shingles. Repair damage to metal flashing, gutters and downspouts that can cause leaks in the roof.
- ☐ Check underside of roof for water stains or dampness.
- ☐ If you have (and use) a fireplace, have the chimney cleaned once a year (more often if you have nightly fires or burn a lot of softwood). A fire burns more efficiently and gives off more heat

when the chimney is clean. But more important, burning wood creates a flammable residue called creosote that can cause a devastating blaze if too much builds up inside the chimney.

- ☐ Test ground-fault circuit breakers, required for any area where there is water, such as kitchens and bathrooms.
- ☐ Vacuum air ducts to prevent dirt and mold buildup, which can trigger allergies.
- ☐ Check condition of lamp cords, extension cords and plugs; replace at first sign of wear or damage.
- ☐ Clean dirt and dust from around furnace.
- ☐ Check driveways and sidewalks for cracks and yard for settlement and soil erosion. Fill in any low spots near the foundation with soil to prevent basement leaks and flooding.
- ☐ Examine your trees and shrubs, and prune back those that are too close to the house or overhanging the roof to prevent damage to roof and siding. Remove any dead trees and broken limbs.
- ☐ Check basement or crawl space for dampness and/or leakage following storms or heavy rains.
- ☐ Test smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors.

## before winter

- ☐ Check weather stripping on doors and windows.
- ☐ Remove window air conditioners.
- ☐ Drain outside water lines and hoses so water doesn't freeze.

## every year

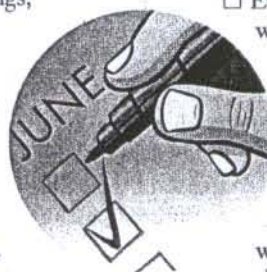
- ☐ Inspect foundation and basement for signs of termite infestation. Termites are attracted to moist or decayed wood. Look for termite

tubes and mud tunnels. Remove dense vegetation growing close to the foundation or siding. Vegetation traps moisture, which creates a better habitat for termites.

- ☐ Check grading of yard to make sure water will drain away from foundation.
- ☐ Lubricate window hardware.
- ☐ Inspect tile in bathrooms and kitchens. Loose tiles and grout need to be re-cemented and resealed to prevent water from seeping into the walls.
- ☐ Evaluate your roof for signs of wear. Sweep debris off flat and low-slope roofs.
- ☐ Check antenna guy wires and supports on roof.
- ☐ Check floors for wear and damage, particularly where one material meets another. Determine whether flooring should be replaced or refinished.
- ☐ Check electrical cords and overhead wiring for damage and missing insulation—replace and repair as needed. Flickering lights and humming noises indicate problems.
- ☐ Clean humidifiers and dehumidifiers to prevent mold growth.
- ☐ Check water heater for signs of leaks or rust. Hot-water tanks should be replaced every 10 years. Drain tank to prevent sediment from building up.
- ☐ Check safety and reversing mechanism on electric garage-door openers; adjust if needed.
- ☐ Change batteries in smoke detector. Set up a regular date to do this, such as the first day of spring. Also check fire extinguishers to ensure they're still fully charged.

## every five years

- ☐ Have your home inspected by a professional inspector.





# trim your insurance bill

**1 Shop around.** Get referrals from friends, check the Yellow Pages or call your state insurance department. Service, such as a timely response, is just as important as price. Ask for quotes from at least three companies and check their complaint records with the National Association of Insurance Commissioners (naic.org).

**2 Know your history.** When you ask for a rate quote, an insurer looks at your house's claims history. See what the insurer sees by ordering your CLUE report (Comprehensive Loss Underwriting Exchange). It's \$13 at [choicetrust.com](http://choicetrust.com). You can challenge mistakes and submit updates.

**3 File fewer claims.** With insurers raising rates and dropping policies if homeowners file frequent

claims, you may be better off footing smaller repair bills.

**4 Cover more yourself.** Raising your deductible from \$500 to \$1,000 will cut your premiums by as much as 25%.

**5 Maintain good credit.** Insurers are increasingly using credit information to price homeowners policies. You can get lower rates if you have good bill-paying and debt habits.

**6 Bundle policies.** You can save 10% to 15% by buying your auto, homeowners and liability policies from the same insurer.

**7 Improve your home security.** You can get discounts of 5% or more for smoke detectors, a burglar alarm, fire extinguishers and deadbolt locks. The break can be as much as 20% if

you install a sprinkler system and a fire and burglar alarm that rings at a police, fire or other monitoring station.



home. Remember that you'll need a rider or extra insurance for items such as expensive jewelry, computers and artwork, which aren't typically covered by standard homeowners insurance.

**8 Seek discounts.** Many insurers give discounts to longtime customers—typically 5% after three to five years and 10% after six years. Retirees, who are at home more than working folks and are less likely to be burglarized, may get discounts of up to 10%.

**9 Review your policy once a year.** Make sure your policy covers any major purchases or additions to your

**10 Make a list of your valuables.** You can do it with a notebook, camera or video recorder. Record as much detail as possible, including date of purchase, and keep receipts so you know what you paid. Every time you buy a big-ticket item, add it to your home inventory, which should be kept outside your home—in a safe-deposit box, for example.

## cut your property taxes

There's a dark side to soaring home values: steeper property taxes. Anything that increases the value of your home, such as rising home prices or adding a room, typically means higher property taxes. But take heart—you can fight the tax man.

In most areas, you have 60 to 90 days after receiving your tax bill to file an appeal. Do your research first. If you find a mistake on your property record—say, your lot is smaller than town records show—you'll have a good chance of lowering your bill. You may also be successful if you can show that your assessment is higher than the recent sales prices of similar homes in your neighborhood. You can hire a licensed appraiser or a property tax consultant to make the appeal; typically a pro will charge about one-third of the savings you are granted. Get a referral from a local realtor or a lawyer who specializes in property tax appeals.

Also look for discounts. There are many programs that give homeowners a break. New York State's STAR program, for example, exempts the first \$30,000 of a home's value from school property taxes (for more information, call 888-NYSTAR5). If you are a senior or disabled, or if your income has recently dropped, you may qualify for a property tax relief program. For more information, buy the National Taxpayers Union brochure "How to Fight Property Taxes" (\$6.95) at [ntu.org](http://ntu.org).



