

 West Lothian Council	Environmental Health		SUBJECT: Controlling Condensation in Your Home
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Information Sheet PH01 Controlling Condensation in Your Home

Condensation is something which will have an impact on most homes if not managed and controlled. Please read this Guidance Note. It will help you understand how this might be happening, and what can be done about it.

What is causing the dampness?

Condensation occurs when moist air comes into contact with a cool surface, and water droplets form. This is the same effect as when you breathe on a mirror.

When this happens on a window, the glass mists up and drops of water will soon trickle down. When it happens on a wall, it soaks up the moisture and becomes damp. Mould then tends to grow on the damp areas.

Where does the moist air come from?

It can come from a number of sources. We all give off water from our bodies all the time, when we breathe and from our skin. We also put lots of water into the air when we use a tumble drier, when we air clothes indoors, take a bath or shower, and even when we cook, or wash the dishes. Bottled gas heaters and paraffin heaters particularly produce large amounts of water vapour.

The moist air can travel through our homes, and will cause condensation if it comes into contact with a cool surface like a window or an outside wall.

Why is it only in certain areas?

Condensation happens most on cool parts of walls, and where there is not much air movement, so it tends to be on outer walls, which are cooler. It often shows as a dark patch next to the ceiling, or next to the skirting, and especially in corners. The sidewalls of windows are often affected, as they can be even colder.

Any areas which have poor ventilation can be very prone to condensation. This might be behind and inside cupboards, dressers and wardrobes, or behind the bed if this is against an outside wall.

It can happen in any room, but tends to be more of a problem in bedrooms and hallways, as these are cooler. Bathrooms have most condensation of all – especially on tiles. But if the walls / tiles are wiped dry, and the bathroom is allowed to air, then that will help prevent any mould forming in that area.

Why are patches of mould growing, and is it harmful?

Mould spores (like seeds) float in the air around us all the time. They normally cause no harm to us because the concentration in the air is very low. If they land on a cool damp area of wall they will start to grow. After a while the mould becomes visible as a dark coloured patch. This is often black, but can be other colours.

At that stage the mould begins to release millions of new spores into the air inside your house. These new spores can very quickly spread the mould to other areas of the house. If they get into clothes then you will notice a fusty smell.

Breathing mould spores can be harmful if someone is already struggling with a respiratory issue such as asthma. But overtime it can also lead to health problems for others. This is still quite rare, but it can happen so it is very important to deal with mouldy patches as soon as possible.

What can I do, and where do I start?

Some simple steps can be taken to prevent rooms becoming damp and mouldy.

If you have mould growing, then deal with that first. It is usually quite easy to control or remove. Some surfaces will be easier to clean and manage than others. But the best thing to do is to wipe off any mould with a disposable cloth or kitchen paper towel soaked in diluted household cleaner, or diluted bleach. There is no need to scrub, or to use strong chemicals. Then wipe over the area again, if required, using diluted household cleaner to manage the ability of mould to grow and spread. Doing this will help reduce spores being released into the air. You may have to keep doing this as part of your regular cleaning. However, you will need to be careful to not overclean as this may add more moisture to the surface allowing mould to form. You will also need to take extra care when using bleach, or mould removing chemicals. Follow the instructions for safe use to ensure you don't cause any harm to yourself or others in the home.

Cleaning will not necessarily provide a permanent fix. So, after dealing with any mould you need to deal with the condensation.

The traditional answer was to turn up the heating to dry up the damp, and open the windows to blow the moist air out. This can work – but it is an expensive use of heating and energy for many people, so nowadays, we suggest a range of measures which work together to cure the problem. We suggest starting with the cheapest and easiest solutions first.

- Think about where you produce moisture into the air, and try to reduce it. For example, if you use a tumble drier in the house, use a ducting kit to take the wet air outside, or a self-condensing attachment. Cook with lids on pans.
- Sometimes we can't help making lots of moisture in the air – cooking, taking a shower, airing clothes etc. The trick is to stop the water spreading to other parts of the house by shutting the door and opening the window in the room to let the wet air escape.
- If you have an extractor fan in a wet area, then use it.

- Damp and mould hate fresh air, so it is vital to keep rooms well aired. It is even more important than keeping it heated. If you have double-glazing, keep the air vent above the window open all the time – unless the wind is too strong and cold. Try to have the window open – just on the first notch will do – for an hour every morning when you get up. On fine days open the window more, if you can do so safely.
- Keep air moving by using a fan or electric blower for a short while each day. You do not have to have the heat on. Just blowing the air around will help a lot.
- Bedding, and clothing stored in drawers and wardrobes, can hold cold air and become fusty quite quickly. So, pull bedding right back every day to let fresh air get to it. Leave the wardrobe door open to let fresh air in. If a room is particularly damp, then you might want to keep clothes stored in a different room. Or you might take it out regularly to air thoroughly, at least until the dampness has improved.
- Any damp areas which are also poorly ventilated will tend to allow mould to grow. This often happens behind wardrobes and cupboards, and at the side of the bed. Try to have a gap behind and around furniture to allow air to circulate. Try not to put furniture against a cold outside wall.
- Try not to let the room get chilled. There is no need to keep the room particularly warm, but a little steady heat is better at keeping the damp at bay. If you can only have the heating on for short periods, then early evening and early morning are the best times.
- Cold walls can be improved by putting in more insulation. This might be as cavity wall insulation, or by dry-lining the walls, for example. Putting in double glazing, draught proofing outside doors and windows, installing extra heating, or moving radiators into damp areas can also work, but are expensive and only used as a last resort.

Start with the easiest and cheapest things at the top of the list first. If you can do most of these things, then the dampness and mould problem should improve quickly. If you find that you still have problems though, please do not hesitate to contact Environmental Health on 01506 280000 or environmentalhealth@westlothian.gov.uk for further advice.

More Information

More detailed information can be found in a Scottish Executive leaflet called “Keep your home free from damp and mould”, available on their web site at <https://www2.gov.scot/Publications/2005/05/10103020/30224>. In some cases, you may be able to get a grant towards the cost of some of the measures. Contact the Energy Efficiency Advice Centre for details on 0800 512 012, or on www.changeworks.org.uk.