

Winter is hard on homes and problems can be expensive to fix. But with a little preventative maintenance, you can save your house – and your wallet – from the worst of the upcoming season.

**Here are some good maintenance tips to take care of your home this Winter.**

- Make sure external waterlines and hose bibs are protected.** Unless they are frost-proof, drain and turn off taps and external pipes to prevent bursting due to water expansion.
- Clean your siding and look for any cracks or separations.** Pay special attention to places where wood meets masonry. Reseal with caulk. If the paint is blistering, peeling or chalking, touch up minor problems or contact a contractor for help.
- Repair or replace damaged weather stripping to prevent drafts and heat loss.** Caulk cracks or gaps around edges before the cold weather sets in, as most caulking needs to be applied when it's warm.
- If you have storm windows, wash and remove screens.** Make sure all windows and doors close tightly.
- Check the bottom of your garage door – if the weather stripping is damaged, snow and ice can warp the door or interfere with the safety device.** If your door doesn't rest fully on the ground, air or animals can find a way inside.
- Walk around your house and make sure the air vents are not blocked by leaves.** Clear any leaves or debris from the side of the house and basement window wells. Once it's clear, check the foundation for cracks and leaks. This can indicate serious problems that require professional attention.
- If you have a crawlspace, make sure it is clear of water, mold and animals.**
- If your air conditioner fits into a window, remove or cover it.**
- Seal your driveway, sidewalk, patio and other paved surfaces to keep water and salt from damaging them.**
- To prevent basement flooding,** ensure the grading of the ground drains water away from the house.
- Check the condition of your roof.** Climb a sturdy ladder and visually inspect your roof for missing or broken shingles. Loose shingles that are in good shape can be nailed down again and re-adhered with a bit of silicone. Apply caulking or cement to other cracks and openings.
- Check the flashing around vents, skylights and chimneys.** If the roof has major problems or you have safety concerns, call a professional roofer.
- Check around the outside of the chimney for cracks in the mortar.** A cap on your chimney will prevent debris, birds and small animals from falling in. Birds in particular pose a hazard – they can be knocked out by exhaust fumes and block the chimney, possibly leading to a deadly carbon monoxide build-up. A clog can also prevent smoke from exiting or allow heat to escape. Get a flashlight and examine the inside for creosote, a black, scaly build-up that can lead to chimney fires if not removed regularly. A qualified chimney sweep should clean the chimney once a year if fireplaces are in active use.
- Clogged gutters can do water damage inside the house, and the added weight of debris and ice can tear them loose.** Clear out the leaves and muck using a spade and hose, or hire someone to help. Make sure the downspout is also clear.
- Check the gutter and downspout alignment to ensure rainwater collects properly in the gutters** and quickly and easily drains away from the house. If water doesn't drain away quickly you'll want the downspouts to extend at least three feet away from the foundation; six feet is better.

**IMPORTANT outdoor holiday lighting safety tips:**

- ❑ Check all light strands for cracked or broken plugs, frayed insulation, or bare wires. Worn cords can cause fires. Discard damaged sets of lights.
- ❑ Make sure lights used to decorate the outside of the house are approved for outdoor use. Never use indoor lights outdoors. Lights should have the Underwriter's Laboratories (UL) label on them.
- ❑ Follow the manufacturer's limits for the number of light strings that you can safely connect together.
- ❑ Don't overload outlets or extension cords; this poses a serious fire hazard.
- ❑ Don't plug more than three standard-sized sets of lights into a single extension cord. If you use a lot of lights for your decorations you should consider adding additional outlets.
- ❑ Always turn off decorative outdoor lights when leaving the house and before going to bed.

We hope you have a safe and happy winter!