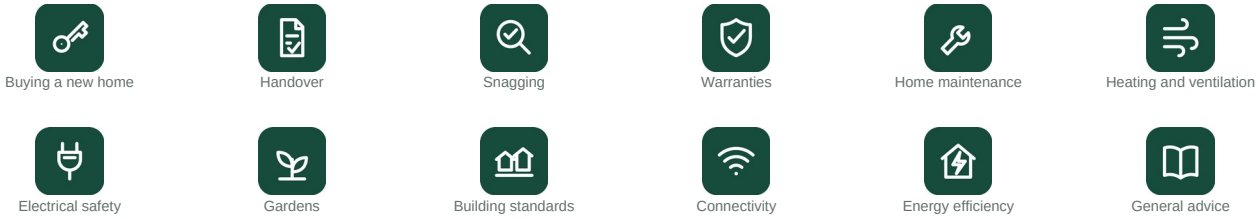
CheckSure
INDEPENDENT NEW-HOME INSPECTIONS

HEATING, VENTILATION AND INDOOR ENVIRONMENT

# Condensation in new-build homes: causes, prevention and practical steps

*Why moisture can be noticeable in a new home, how to manage it and when the building needs checking*

PART OF THE CHECKSURE HOMEOWNER KNOWLEDGE BASE



**The short answer:** condensation forms when moist air meets a surface cold enough for water to collect. It can be more noticeable while a new home dries, but repeated condensation and mould should not simply be dismissed as normal. Use the ventilation and heating systems correctly, reduce avoidable moisture and report persistent problems so that defects, leaks or cold spots can be ruled out.

CheckSure's Homeowner Knowledge Base draws on practical experience of building, inspecting and resolving defects in new homes. Our aim is to explain what homeowners should reasonably expect, what may require further investigation and what steps they can take next.

# What is condensation?

Condensation follows a simple chain: everyday activities add water vapour to the air; the air reaches a colder surface; and some of the vapour becomes liquid water. Reducing moisture, keeping surfaces reasonably warm and using the designed ventilation all help break that chain.

Air contains invisible water vapour. Warm air can hold more vapour than cold air, so when warm, humid air reaches a colder surface it may cool enough to release some of that moisture as droplets. This is why condensation is often first noticed on windows, outside walls and around external door or window openings.

It can also appear where air movement is restricted, including behind large furniture, inside crowded cupboards and at wall-to-ceiling junctions. The presence of moisture in one of these locations points towards condensation, but location alone does not prove the cause. Plumbing leaks, rain penetration, missing insulation and ventilation faults can produce similar symptoms.

# Why can it be more noticeable in a new home?

Plaster, mortar, concrete and other construction materials contain moisture when they are installed. Once the completed home is occupied and heated, those materials dry gradually and some of their moisture enters the indoor air. NHBC describes this as a slow process that takes time to complete.

There is no fixed drying timetable for every new home. Construction moisture may continue to leave the building for many months, depending on the materials used, the season, heating, ventilation and occupation. Persistent or localised damp should not automatically be attributed to drying out when a leak, insulation gap or ventilation fault may be present.

New homes are designed to limit uncontrolled heat loss. Part L deals with energy performance and airtightness; Part F deals with the ventilation needed for healthy indoor air; and Part C addresses resistance to moisture. These requirements must work together. Insulation, draught-proof doors and sealed windows reduce accidental airflow, so moisture must leave through the ventilation designed for the home, such as trickle ventilators, extractor fans or a whole-house mechanical system.

Everyday living adds more moisture. Cooking, bathing, showering, boiling water, drying clothes indoors and even breathing all contribute. Houseplants, pets and frequent wet floor-cleaning can add smaller amounts. Condensation is most likely when moisture production is high, ventilation is limited and internal surfaces have been allowed to become cold.


*Figure 1. Everyday moisture can condense on colder surfaces. Use the home's ventilation and heating as intended, and investigate persistent damp or mould.*

# Use the ventilation provided

Ventilation is part of how a modern home is intended to work. It is not an optional extra to be used only after condensation appears. The exact system varies, so begin with the Home User Guide and the manufacturer's operating instructions supplied for your property.

## Keep the handover information

Locate the Home User Guide and the operating instructions for extractor fans, cooker hoods and any whole-house ventilation system. Keep details of boost controls, air valves, filter cleaning and replacement intervals where they can be found easily. If this information was not supplied, ask the developer or system manufacturer for the correct documents for your property.

## Trickle ventilators and windows

Where trickle ventilators form part of the design, leave them open as instructed when rooms are occupied, including in winter. They provide background airflow without leaving the window unsecured. Opening windows more widely for a short period can help remove a temporary build-up of moisture, but it should not be treated as a substitute for a faulty or missing ventilation system.

## Kitchen and bathroom extract

Use extractor fans while cooking, bathing or showering and keep the room door closed so that moisture is removed near its source. NHBC advises continuing to extract or leaving the window open for about 20 minutes afterwards. Check that fans actually run, that boost settings work where fitted and that external grilles are not blocked.

A recirculating cooker hood filters grease and odours but does not necessarily discharge moisture outdoors. Check what type you have before relying on it as the kitchen's extract ventilation.

## Mechanical ventilation systems

If the home has mechanical extract ventilation or mechanical ventilation with heat recovery (MVHR), do not switch it off because of noise or perceived running cost. Follow the controls and maintenance

instructions, keep air valves clear and clean or replace filters at the specified intervals. If the system is unusually noisy, ineffective or appears unbalanced, report it rather than permanently disabling it.

## Reduce moisture without blaming everyday living

Normal household activities create moisture; that does not mean condensation is automatically the occupant's fault. The practical aim is to limit avoidable peaks while making sure the building and its ventilation work as intended.

- Use lids on saucepans and use the kitchen extract when producing steam.
- Avoid drying clothes on radiators. If indoor drying is unavoidable, contain it in a ventilated room with the door closed.
- Make sure a vented tumble dryer discharges outdoors; follow the instructions for condenser and heat-pump dryers.
- Wipe persistent droplets from windows and sills so they do not damage adjacent finishes.
- Leave a small air gap behind large furniture on cold external walls and avoid overfilling cupboards.
- Remember that numerous houseplants, pets and frequent wet floor-cleaning can also add moisture; increase ventilation appropriately if these are significant in your home.

## A first-months moisture checklist

During the early months, use this short routine alongside the instructions supplied for the home:

- Keep the ventilation system operating as instructed and use boost mode during moisture-intensive activities where it is provided.
- Keep trickle ventilators open where they form part of the ventilation design.
- Use kitchen and bathroom extraction at source and allow it to continue after cooking, bathing or showering.
- Maintain reasonably even heating, particularly during cool or cold weather.
- Avoid drying clothes on radiators and ventilate appropriately when indoor drying is unavoidable.
- Keep air paths around furniture, air valves and inside cupboards reasonably clear.

## Keep the home reasonably warm

Condensation is more likely on cold surfaces. A reasonably even pattern of heating can therefore help, particularly during the first winter. Rooms that are rarely used should not be allowed to remain much colder than the rest of the home for long periods.

There is no single temperature that prevents condensation in every property. The result depends on outside weather, insulation, air movement and indoor humidity. If the home is difficult or unaffordable to heat, seek appropriate energy or housing support rather than assuming the problem can be solved by occupant behaviour alone.

The aim is a comfortable moisture balance, not air that is as dry as possible. Excessive dehumidification can be uncomfortable and will not correct a leak, missing insulation or defective ventilation. Treat a dehumidifier as a temporary supporting measure rather than the remedy for an unresolved building problem.

## Condensation in the roof space

A loft is colder than the rooms below because insulation at ceiling level is intended to retain heat within the living space. Moist air can pass through ceilings and through gaps around loft hatches, pipes, cables and downlights. When it meets cold roof timbers or underlay, condensation can form.

NHBC says most cases of roof-space condensation are temporary and are often associated with cold weather or rapid temperature changes. Even so, the roof's intended ventilation path must remain clear. Do not block eaves vents with insulation or stored belongings, and do not leave the loft hatch open for long periods.

Not every roof uses open eaves ventilation; some designs rely on vapour-permeable underlay or another specified arrangement. Do not add vents or alter insulation without understanding the roof design. Persistent wetting, staining or mould on timbers should be reported and assessed.

## Condensation, damp and mould are not the same thing

Condensation is one source of moisture. Damp may also result from a plumbing leak, rain penetration, defective seals, drainage problems, missing insulation or another building fault. Mould is a fungus that can grow where surfaces remain damp. Cleaning the visible growth does not remove the underlying cause.

Current UK government health guidance says damp and mould can affect the airways and lungs and can also affect the eyes and skin. Risk is greater for some people, including those with respiratory conditions, weakened immune systems, older people, babies and young children. Visible mould should therefore be dealt with promptly and its cause investigated.

## What to do if mould appears

Photograph the area before cleaning it and note when and where it appeared. Small areas may be treated with a suitable product in accordance with the manufacturer's safety instructions, provided nobody at increased health risk is exposed. Do not dry-brush or vacuum mould because this can release spores.

Larger, recurring or widespread growth calls for professional advice. Address the moisture source, ventilation, heating and any building deficiency as well as the surface growth. Mould-resistant paint may be useful after a surface is clean and dry, but paint alone is not a remedy.

## A practical sequence for checking the cause

Work through these checks without assuming at the outset that the problem is either normal condensation or a building defect:

1. Check first for a plumbing leak, failed seal, roof or rainwater penetration, particularly where dampness is localised.
2. Look for restricted airflow behind furniture, inside crowded cupboards and around blocked air valves or vents.
3. Confirm that extractor fans, trickle ventilators and any mechanical system are present, operating and set as instructed.
4. Consider whether recent activities or occupancy have created an unusual moisture peak and apply sensible source-control measures.
5. If no other cause is apparent, construction drying may be contributing; continue to monitor, record and report any persistent or worsening dampness.

## When should you report the problem?

Some window condensation during cold weather can occur even in a well-managed home. Report the matter to the developer, landlord or relevant warranty provider when:

- condensation is severe or persists despite using the heating and ventilation as instructed;
- an extractor fan, mechanical system or trickle ventilator is missing, damaged or ineffective;

- mould returns after cleaning or covers a substantial area;
- dampness is confined to one location and may indicate a leak, failed seal or rain penetration;
- walls, ceilings, roof timbers or belongings remain wet;
- there is staining, peeling decoration, a musty smell or visible damage; or
- any occupant develops symptoms or has a condition that increases their vulnerability to damp and mould.

Keep a dated record of humidity readings if you have a reliable monitor, but do not treat one reading as a diagnosis. Photographs, weather conditions, room use and ventilation settings can help an inspector identify the cause. Where a persistent cold area, ventilation concern or insulation gap is suspected, ask the developer to confirm the Part L edition and specification for the plot and to provide the signed as-built BREL report, construction photographs and ventilation information.

# Common misunderstandings

### “Condensation always means a leak”

Surface condensation commonly results from moisture meeting cold surfaces, although persistent local damp may need investigation.

### “A new home should be kept completely sealed”

Ventilation must be used as designed, particularly while construction moisture is drying.

### “Opening windows is the only solution”

Heating, extractor fans, trickle vents, moisture control and correct system operation all contribute.

# Frequently asked questions

### Is condensation in a new home always normal?

No. Extra construction moisture can make condensation more likely during drying out, but persistent damp may also indicate inadequate ventilation, a cold bridge, a leak or another defect. The cause should be investigated if sensible measures do not improve it.

### Should I close trickle vents in winter?

Normally no, where they form part of the home’s ventilation design. Use them in accordance with the Home User Guide. Closing them may reduce background airflow and allow moisture and other indoor pollutants to accumulate.

### Will a dehumidifier solve the problem?

A dehumidifier can reduce moisture temporarily, but it does not repair a defective fan, blocked vent, leak or missing insulation. Use one only as a supporting measure and follow the manufacturer’s instructions, particularly around electrical safety and drainage.

# Key takeaways

- Construction moisture can make condensation more noticeable while a new home dries.
- Ventilation systems should be used and maintained as designed, not switched off.
- Steady warmth, source control and air circulation all help reduce condensation.
- Repeated damp or mould should not be dismissed as occupant behaviour without checking the building.
- Record and report persistent problems early, especially where health or building damage may be involved.

**EXPLORE FURTHER** Explore the CheckSure Homeowner Knowledge Base for related guidance on buying, inspecting and looking after a new home. Please visit checksure.co.uk/knowledge-base/

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# Need help with your new home?

Contact CheckSure for an independent assessment of your new home.

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