HOME MAINTENANCE

Cracks in new-build homes: what is normal and when should you be concerned?

How to recognise likely drying and settlement cracks, what to record and when to seek investigation

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General advice

The short answer: fine cracks can develop as a new home dries and materials undergo small amounts of normal movement. A crack should not be dismissed simply because the home is new. Record it, look at its position and behaviour, and report cracks that are widening, displaced, damp, recurring or associated with other movement. Small stable shrinkage cracks can be repaired using the separate CheckSure guide once monitoring is no longer needed.

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.

Figure 1. Record a crack with a scale and photograph so its width, pattern and change over time can be assessed.

Why cracks appear

Crack width is only one clue. Position, direction, whether it crosses different materials, whether doors or windows have changed, and whether the crack is growing all help determine the next step.

New homes contain plaster, concrete, mortar, timber and other materials that dry or respond to temperature and humidity. Small movements occur where materials meet and around openings. Fine surface cracks can therefore appear during the first heating seasons without indicating structural failure.

Other cracks arise from defective plasterboard joints, loose plaster, missing movement joints, poor workmanship, water damage, foundation movement or structural change. Appearance alone does not always identify the cause.

Features that are often consistent with shrinkage

- fine cracks within plaster or at wall-to-ceiling junctions;
- small gaps between plaster and skirting boards, architraves or window boards;
- cracks that appeared during drying and have then remained stable;
- no displacement, dampness or related sticking of doors and windows.

These features are clues, not a remote diagnosis. Developer and warranty standards use their own tolerances and inspection criteria. Photograph the crack before repair and check the documentation for your home.

Warning signs that need investigation

- the crack is widening or lengthening;
- one side is higher, bowed or displaced;
- a diagonal or stepped pattern continues through masonry or several finishes;
- the same crack repeatedly reopens after repair;
- doors or windows bind, floors slope or finishes move nearby;
- there is dampness, staining, rust, mould or a plumbing leak;
- plaster or drylining is loose or hollow over a wider area; or
- the crack presents a safety concern or allows weather into the building.

Report these signs promptly to the developer and, where relevant, the warranty provider. An appropriately qualified structural engineer or building professional may be needed where structural movement is suspected.

How to record a crack

1. Take a clear photograph in good light with a ruler or scale beside the crack.
2. Record the date, room, wall and exact position.
3. Measure consistently at the same points without damaging the finish.
4. Note related weather, heating changes, leaks, sticking joinery or outside cracking.
5. Repeat photographs only often enough to show whether the crack is stable or changing.

Do not rely on pencil marks alone where decoration could be damaged or the mark could be confused with the crack. A simple dated photo record is usually more useful.

When a small crack can be repaired

If the crack is fine, dry, stable and not associated with a defect or unresolved claim, it may be reasonable to treat it as routine decoration. The follow-on article “Shrinkage and how to repair it” explains how to choose between filler and paintable decorators’ caulk and gives a safe preparation and finishing sequence.

Do not repair first if doing so would hide evidence needed by the developer, warranty provider or professional adviser. Keep the original photographs and correspondence.

Developer and warranty boundaries

There is no single crack-width rule that determines every case. Builders and warranty providers may publish tolerances for particular finishes, locations and stages, and stairwells or structural elements can be treated differently. A numerical threshold is not a substitute for considering movement, displacement, pattern and related symptoms.

What an inspection may consider

A professional may look at the crack pattern, construction type, nearby openings, external elevations, levels, moisture and the building’s history. Monitoring may be recommended where the cause is uncertain. This is different from repeatedly filling a crack without understanding why it returns.

Key takeaways

- Fine stable cracks can be part of normal drying, but “new build” is not a diagnosis.
- Record cracks before decorating and watch for change, displacement, damp or related movement.
- Use developer and warranty standards relevant to the home rather than a threshold copied from another builder.
- Use HOM-004 for repairing small stable shrinkage cracks only after reporting or monitoring is no longer needed.

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/

Sources & References

NHBC — Cracking in your home. Primary warranty-provider homeowner guidance.
https://www.nhbc.co.uk/homeowners/maintaining-your-home/cracking-in-homes

Need help with your new home?

Contact CheckSure for an independent assessment of your new home.

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