

Home Maintenance Guide

The Archicentre Home Maintenance Guide is designed to help you look after that most important asset - your home. Archicentre wishes you many years of trouble-free ownership. However, deterioration will occur quickly in homes that are not looked after, so it is imperative that you undertake a regular home maintenance program to ensure that your home remains in good condition.

As a guide, in addition to any faults noted by the Archicentre inspector, home buyers should budget for spending around 5% of the value of the home on maintenance and repairs over the first few years.

It is important that faults needing urgent attention noted by your inspecting architect are attended to quickly. If you are in doubt about any aspect of your report, contact your architect.

Maintenance – Outside the house

Watering the garden

You should aim to maintain a constant minimum level of moisture in the ground near the house. Keeping the soil moist prevents sudden and severe brickwork cracking due to drying and shrinking soils, especially clay soils. Drip watering systems are better than sprinklers, because the water slowly infiltrates the soil rather than running off. Your water supply authority may allow drip systems to be used during water restrictions if they incorporate a pressure reducer and timer. You should contact them for further details.

It is important that fast growing trees are not planted close to the house, as tree-induced drying is the biggest cause of footing failure and brickwork cracking in clay soils.

Where large trees already exist, tree pruning is advisable or in severe cases, erecting root barriers. Refer to Archicentre's Technical Information Sheet on "Cracking in Brickwork and Block Masonry" for further details.

Draining the garden

Clay soils can swell in wet conditions and shrink in dry weather, uncompacted soil can subside and any of these conditions may cause a brick house to crack. In extreme wet conditions concrete floor slabs can become damp if not properly waterproofed.

If your ground becomes unacceptably boggy in wet weather, you can install agricultural drains and backfill with coarse aggregate. In addition, to alleviate the bogginess underfoot, import sandy loam to raise the garden's surface above the water table. Filling against brick walls should be lower than 150mm beneath floor level and should not be above the damp-proof course or weep holes. Drain away from the house at all times to decrease sub-floor dampness. In older brick homes, wet soils along with faulty damp-proof courses are a major factor contributing to rising dampness.



Maintaining fences

Regularly cut back trees and creepers and drain away boggy soils to prevent early deterioration of your fences. You should remove soil build-up from the bottom board, the plinth, or it will deteriorate rapidly, particularly if the soil is moist. If soil build-up is inevitable, renew the ordinary hardwood plinth with CCA treated pine or a rot resistant hardwood such as redgum, since these rot far slower.

Preventing slippery pathways

Encroaching trees should be trimmed back to prevent paths becoming mouldy, and slippery. Surface drains may be appropriate also. If your paths are already a little slippery, scrub them with chloride based cleaner, or fungicide from nurseries.

You can etch a texture into very slippery concrete, by drenching sawdust with 10:1 water: hydrochloric acid mixture, and leaving it on the surface for an hour, raking several times during the hour. The residue may still be dangerously corrosive: take all necessary precautions when disposing of it.

Maintaining the roof

You should regularly check the roof, especially after high winds and storms. The best way to examine the roof is by climbing into the roofspace. Newly dislodged tiles will permit increased light to filter through, and the timber frame may show white powder or dark water stains which can be traced back up to cracked tiles.

When replacing, repositioning or mortaring defective tiles, be careful not to crack more of them whilst walking on the roof. A professional may need to be called in if your tiles are too brittle. Professionals should have spare tiles to

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replace any cracked ones. Lichen growth does not indicate deterioration, and can be removed if required. Ask for Archicentre's Technical Information Sheet "Roofing and Guttering".

Metal roofs can rust quickly once their protective coating is scratched. Pinprick rust holes will show up like stars at night, from your vantage point in the roofspace. If access to the roofspace was restricted during the Home Inspection, remedy the situation if possible, so you can perform a roof and framing check yourself.



Maintaining gutters

Examine your gutters regularly.

Gutters can rust extremely quickly especially when leaves accumulate. Leaves will pond water in your gutters, which accelerates rusting, and the action of the leaves decaying may accelerate the rusting still further. A property with overhanging trees may need its gutters cleared of decomposing leaves every few weeks during autumn and winter to prevent rusting. So cutting back is recommended. Additionally, you can wedge mesh into the tops of gutters to minimise leaf build-up, and permit smoother running of water.

As with roofs, you should check gutters after stormy weather, to see that none of the tiles overhanging the gutters have dislodged, creating a gap. This is a favourite entry point for birds, possums and rats.

Underneath the guttering (the eaves lining) is another popular spot for animal entry. The eaves linings should be checked regularly for deterioration, because animals can peck and chew their way in very quickly. The eaves material can of course deteriorate over time but often the decay is due to water leaking from the roof, or from overflowing or leaking gutters.

Localised rusting of gutters can be remedied by patching, puttying, or painting with bituminous products from hardware stores, but these are temporary measures.

The house cladding

Cracks in brickwork can often be easily remedied with proper garden care. Gradually warping weatherboards may be caused simply because of their exposure to the elements, or the house frame drying and warping. These are not severe problems, and normally contain themselves within reasonable limits. However, warping weatherboards may indicate subfloor failure. It is important to maintain a good protective paint or stain coating on all exposed timberwork, otherwise deterioration such as splitting and rotting will occur.

Maintaining outbuildings

Structural maintenance will be the same as for the main house. However, wiring to outbuildings is often of a lower standard and may have been installed illegally. Often wiring is buried underground, hidden from the inspecting architect's view. Be careful when digging in the garden, or you may hit an unprotected wire.

If you are in doubt about the electrical system, have an electrician check it for you.

Maintenance – Inside the house

Maintaining the roof space

Your roof frame and ceiling rafters can warp and deflect over time, but unless the inspector drew attention to a framing fault in the Inspection Report, there is little chance of a serious fault developing. However, if roofs are re-roofed with a material heavier than the original covering, serious damage can occur unless the roof is strengthened.

It is advisable to regularly examine the roofspace. By doing this you may notice unusual smells, which may indicate the intrusion of animals or water. Don't delay in removing intruding animals, because they can cause damage such as staining ceilings and chewed wiring.

If contracting the services of professionals enquire as to their membership of the relevant professional association, and what follow-up service or guarantees this body provides its members' clients.

Maintaining ceilings and walls

Most plaster walls will crack in time, but provided your footings and foundations are sound, generally all that is required is to patch cracks when re-painting.

Recurring cracks may indicate a structural problem and warrant further investigation.

The walls and ceilings in old homes may eventually bulge, or sag, as the plaster gets older or deteriorates due to

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condensation and roof leaks. The walls may sound “drummy” or hollow, when tapped. If they have reached this advanced stage the best solution is to replace them.

If your house is brick, check the walls regularly for rising damp, which is caused by a breakdown of the damp-proof course, compounded by damp external conditions. Ask for Archicentre’s Technical Information Sheet on “Treatment of Dampness in the Home”.



Maintaining living conditions inside the house

You should aim to maintain a reasonable circulation of air in the house, to prevent stale air, excessive humidity and condensation all of which may affect your health and cause materials to deteriorate.

Vapour-producing items such as stoves, clothes driers and showers should all be well vented to the outside of the house.

Long periods of stagnant, moist conditions in your house will encourage mould, which can be hard to eradicate completely once it appears. Chloride-based cleaners will scrub most of it off, followed by an application of fungicidal paint for future protection.

If outside vegetation is allowed to encroach on the house, it may also encourage damp, dark, moist conditions: so it should be trimmed back. Mouldy conditions are also caused by sub-floor dampness.

Jamming windows and doors

If windows and doors persistently jam, your footings may be faulty, your stumps may have rotted or your piers may have moved depending on which form of sub-structure your house has. Jamming is particularly prevalent in older homes where structural subsidence is common.

Subsidence of floors, doors and windows can occur suddenly once footing failure and timber rot reaches a critical point. Periodic sub-floor examination will help keep an eye on the situation (ie. probing timber stumps at

ground level will reveal their degree of deterioration). If your sub-floor is constructed on subsiding piers or concrete footings, underpinning may be required. Check sub-floor drainage first as very wet soil can contribute to subsidence. It is recommended that repair of significant subsidence be undertaken quickly to minimise secondary damage.

Maintaining services

Make sure services are in good order. Have gas leaks fixed immediately. Fuses which blow with increasing regularity indicate a fundamental wiring problem and should be attended to immediately. In older homes, blowing fuses may indicate a wiring system which has come to the end of its working life. They may also occur after the replacement of light fittings, or after recent renovations and extensions, because wiring which is intact when left alone, can disintegrate when touched. Also the total load on the system may increase as a result. Do not attempt any re-wiring work yourself, always contact a licensed electrician.

Cold water systems in older homes can deteriorate very rapidly, sometimes rendering the system useless within a few months.

Many old homes have galvanised iron pipes which have a limited life expectancy.

If cold water pressure drops significantly, it is worthwhile having a plumber replace the main supply pipe.

Maintaining timber floors

Floors may squeak in time, particularly during dry conditions. Floorboards can easily be “packed” with fibro-cement pieces or wedges of wood, and there is generally no structural problem - the timbers are simply warping or shrinking as they dry.

Maintaining the sub-floor

It is important to keep the sub-floor free from debris. By removing all debris, you help ensure maximum sub-floor ventilation, which is vital in controlling sub-floor dampness. Damp sub-floors often make the house smell musty and mouldy. Black mould may appear on walls, and sometimes white “beards” of mould may appear under the house. Stumps (where applicable), bearers and joists will rot much faster when subjected to mould and damp conditions. Clean out sub-floor vents regularly, to prevent these stagnant conditions occurring. Install more vents if mouldy smells persist.

Periodically check the ground below the shower recess, and other wet areas, to ensure that the water seals have not broken down over time. The floor framing timbers may also show water stains close to these areas. Defective water seals are one of the most common causes of timber rot.

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Homes which contain timber stumps as part of their sub-floor structure will eventually be subject to stump rot. Stumps deteriorate first just below ground level, and the best way to extend their life is to keep the ground dry. Sloping floors, continually jamming windows and doors, cracking plaster all indicate likely stump decay. If more than 30% of stumps are affected, you should replace them all.

Periodically examine the sub-floor for signs of termites. They build mud tunnels under concrete slabs, over stumps and base walls to get to the house. Again, for both termites and borers (which are harder to find) the first line of defence is to keep the sub-floor as dry and as well ventilated as possible, and especially remove all timber debris. One sign of borer damage is the gritty dust residue they leave behind. A spongy floor is another indication. Call a local member of the appropriate pest control association if you suspect infestation.

Traces of fine sawdust from hardwoods often indicates the presence of lyctid borer, but this species does not usually do any significant structural damage. You may have to replace a skirting board or architrave because of them, but little else.

Give your home a check-up

Most people give their cars and themselves regular checkups, but tend to leave maintenance of their homes until a problem becomes so obvious that it simply has to be attended to. This approach is bad for the house and more expensive on the pocket.

RAIA Archicentre recommends this guide to you, and recommends an architect's inspection every five years, to keep the house in tip top condition.

Our architects can also be called upon to help plan the renovations for your home.

Technical Sheets

As a valued client, if you require any further technical sheets which are not enclosed with your original Inspection Report, we will be pleased to send them to you at no charge. For technical sheets or further information, contact your nearest Archicentre State office:



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