

The essential homeowners' check list

How to maintain your home.

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The logo for Money Magazine, featuring the word "Money" in a bold, green, sans-serif font.

NEW YORK (MONEY Magazine) - There's no getting around it. For most of us, our home is our single most valuable asset.

But unlike traditional investments, which might appreciate even if you left them alone, a home requires regular attention and care if you want to protect its value.

Here's a guide to smart moves you can make to safeguard your home, including tips on maintenance, insurance and taxes

1. Inspect your house.

If you're like most homeowners, the last time you had your home inspected was when you bought it.

But home inspections aren't just for home buyers. If you want to catch small problems early, hire a home inspector every five years (cost: \$300 to \$500).

"Unfortunately, there's a lot that can go wrong that you can't see, smell or hear," says Stephen Gladstone, the president of the American Society of Home Inspectors. "Mold and mildew, water problems, invisible gases -- all those things can harm us and our home."

To find a qualified home inspector, check with the American Society of Home Inspectors (www.ashi.org).

2. Start a maintenance log.

Record the date when each job is done so you know when to check for wear and damage. Also record the costs for each job and who did the repairs so you know whom to call if you have problems.

If you do the work yourself, note the materials used and where you purchased them.

3. Make upkeep routine.

It should become a habit. Spring is a good time to do a comprehensive inventory of your house, particularly if you live in an area where the winter weather is harsh. [Click here](#) for a maintenance timeline.

4. Create a maintenance and repair fund.

How much you spend on maintenance and repairs depends on the age of your home, how it's been treated by previous owners, the climate you live in and how much you want to get out of it when you sell.

One rough rule of thumb: Budget 1 to 3 percent of the home's value for annual repairs and maintenance. So if your home is worth \$200,000, set aside \$2,000 to \$6,000. The older the home, the more maintenance it will need.

5. Keep water out.

Water is the No. 1 cause of damage to homes. The penetration of moisture -- vapor, water or ice -- can cause paint failure, mold, foundation problems and masonry cracks.

Check regularly for leaks in the basement, particularly after storms or heavy rains. Remove debris from the roof and gutters so water doesn't back up and damage the exterior. Seal roof flashings to prevent leaks.

Extend or install downspouts or splash blocks to prevent basement flooding, leaks and soil erosion. Put a dehumidifier in the basement to prevent condensation on the walls, especially in humid weather. Keep the unit clean to prevent mold.

6. Invest in better materials.

Using upgraded materials can reduce the amount and frequency of maintenance. For example, replacing water lines on appliances such as your washing machine and dishwasher with stainless-steel hoses instead of rubber ones goes a long way in preventing floods.

Water damage from burst pipes and appliances accounts for 20 percent of all insurance claims, says Jim Swegle, vice president of homeowners insurance at Safeco Insurance.

7. Do preventive fixes.

Install chimney caps to keep out rain and critters. Caulk exterior trim, windows and doors to prevent leaks. Trim trees near the house and roof to prevent damage during storms or on windy days.

Keep any wood exposed to weather painted and sealed to stop moisture penetration, which can lead to dry rot and termites. A \$20 gallon of waterproofing seal can save hundreds in deck repairs in the long run. Clean the kitchen exhaust fan and the clothes dryer vent to prevent fire.

"Small fixes can go a long way," says veteran home inspector Mike Kuhn, author of "The Pocket Idiot's Guide to Home Inspections."