A damp patch on a wall or ceiling

Rory J Dench
UK-wide pointers: England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland

You've found a damp patch and don't know why. Start by asking where the water is coming from and why it can't dry out. Which product to buy comes later.

What you might see

- A patch high on a wall or round a window, worse after heavy rain.
- Tide mark and flaking plaster low on a wall.
- Fluffy white crystals on the surface (salts).
- A patch on a chimney breast, sometimes brown-stained.
- A wet patch on a ceiling, or staining under a bathroom.
- Soft or crumbly skirting with a mushroom smell (see the timber card).

Likely causes

- **Rain getting in.** Blocked or broken gutters and downpipes, slipped slates, failed flashings, cracked sills, open joints, cracked cement render or harling.
- **Ground moisture.** Soil, paving or a path built up against the wall, blocked gullies, leaking drains, and cement render or gypsum plaster that stops the wall drying.
- **A leak.** A pipe, radiator, shower tray or washing machine can look just like rising or penetrating damp.
- **Condensation** is a separate cause. See card 2.

What you can safely check yourself

- Look outside at the same spot as the patch: gutter, downpipe, sill, pointing, render.
- Watch the gutters and downpipes in heavy rain, with a torch if it is dark. Note where water spills or runs down the wall.
- Look at the ground at the foot of the wall. Is it higher than the floor inside? Is there a path or patio tight to the wall? Are any air vents buried?
- Look at pipes, taps and the bath or shower seals nearby for any leak.
- Take dated photos, so you can see whether the patch grows or dries.

When to call a professional

- Ask a roofer or plumber first if the source is plainly a gutter, slate or pipe.
- For a patch you can't explain, ask an independent building surveyor who works with traditional buildings.

What to ask them

- Where do you think the moisture is coming from?
- Did you test the wall itself (for example drilled samples tested in a lab) or only take meter readings?
- Is there anything outside, such as ground levels, drains or coatings, that explains it?
- Did anyone damp-proof here before? Who did it, and is the guarantee still valid?

Who to look for

- Independent building surveyor with traditional-building experience (in England and Wales, a RICS Level 3 surveyor with conservation experience; in Scotland, RICS conservation accreditation or regular pre-1919 work).
- Roofer, plumber or drainage contractor, depending on the source.
- If a firm that also sells damp treatment gives you a free survey, ask how it found the cause, and consider an independent opinion as well. A firm that sells the fix has a financial interest in what it recommends, even if its advice is honest.
- In Northern Ireland, ask for a chartered building surveyor (RICS) with experience of traditional buildings.

Worth knowing. Electrical moisture meters are made for timber. On plaster and masonry, salts and metals can make readings misleading, so a reading shows a pattern at best and is not a diagnosis (Historic England, *Assessing Damp in Historic Buildings*). Cement or waterproof plaster can trap moisture in some solid walls.

WHERE THE RULES DIFFER BY NATION	
England	For listed building consent, apply to your local planning authority. Historic England is the national body. For building regulations, apply to your council's building control or to a Registered Building Control Approver (a private firm on the Building Safety Regulator's register). *Official pages: historicengland.org.uk and gov.uk/building-regulations-approval*
Wales	For listed building consent, apply to your local planning authority. Cadw is the Welsh Government's historic environment service. For building regulations, apply to your council's building control or to a Registered Building Control Approver on the Wales register. *Official pages: cadw.gov.wales and gov.wales/find-building-control-body*
Scotland	For listed building consent, your council's planning department is the main contact. Historic Environment Scotland is the national body. A building warrant is the permission needed for much building work. It comes from your council's building standards team (the "verifier"). Scotland has no private approvers. *Official pages: historicenvironment.scot and mygov.scot/building-warrant*
Northern Ireland	For listed building consent, apply to your district council, which asks the Department for Communities' Historic Environment Division (HED) for advice. For building regulations, apply to your district council's building control. *Official pages: communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/listed-buildings and nidirect.gov.uk/articles/how-apply-building-regulations-approval*
If you plan structural work, ask your council whether your job needs building control approval (a building warrant in Scotland) before you start. If the house is listed or in a conservation area, ask the council before changing the outside. Grants for repairs may exist for some buildings. Check the official page for your nation before you plan on one. Consent decisions are for your council, not this card.	

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General information for homes in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, with fuller pointers for England, Wales and Scotland. It is not legal, surveying, engineering or financial advice, and it is not a survey, a damp or timber diagnosis, or a check that anything in your home is safe. It does not promise any result, such as that a repair will work or that a consent will be granted. Rules, consents and registers differ between the nations and change over time. Check with your council or the official body named, and take independent professional advice about your own property before you commit to work or spend money. This does not affect your legal rights as a consumer.

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