Condensation and black mould

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

Black spots in cold corners and wet windows on winter mornings are common in old houses, especially ones that have been made airtight. It is usually caused by warm, moist air meeting a cold surface, not a failed wall.

What you might see

- Black mould spots in cold corners, behind wardrobes, round window reveals, worse in winter.
- Water running down the inside of windows on cold mornings.
- A musty smell in a house that has been shut up and unheated.

Likely causes

- Everyday moisture in the air: breathing, cooking, showers and drying washing indoors.
- Cold surfaces: single glazing, cold external walls, cold ceilings.
- Less airflow than the house used to have: new windows without trickle vents, blocked fireplaces, covered floor vents, no extractor fans.
- Low or on-off heating, which lets walls and rooms stay cold.

What you can safely check yourself

- Put a cheap digital hygrometer (it measures humidity) in the bedroom for a week. If it stays high every morning, the damp may be coming from daily living.
- Pull furniture a hand's width off cold external walls and see whether the spots follow the furniture.
- Check that extractor fans work, and that fireplaces and floor vents have not been sealed.
- Open windows after showers and cooking, and keep the lid on pans.
- Check for the other causes first. Is the patch beside a leaking gutter or pipe? If so, see card 1.

When to call a professional

- If it keeps coming back despite heat and ventilation, or is in a bedroom where a child or anyone with asthma sleeps, talk to a professional about the room and the heating.

What to ask them

- Could this be condensation, or do you see another source of moisture? What makes you think so?
- What would you change to give the house steady background heat and enough ventilation?
- Is any ventilation I'm proposing to add or remove compatible with the flues and fires in the house?

Who to look for

- Independent building surveyor with traditional-building experience.
- Heating engineer or electrician for extractor fans, depending on the job. Check their registration with the relevant scheme.
- Your GP or pharmacist, if anyone in the home has a health concern they think the mould may be causing.

Worth knowing. A damp-proof course does not address condensation, which comes from moisture in the air.

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 to add fans, vents, heating or flues, ask your council's building control (building standards in Scotland) whether your job needs approval. 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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