

Track that leak

Where the water's dripping likely isn't where it's coming in

By Kenya McCullum

Roof leaks are not just an inconvenience for homeowners — they can cause serious damage to a house by encouraging the growth of mold and mildew, as well as ruining insulation and creating the perfect conditions for wood rot. By the time you actually notice that your roof has been leaking, chances are the leak is well on its way to doing damage, so it's important to track the leak as soon as possible and get it fixed.

That's easier said than done. Generally, the area where you first notice water on a ceiling is not directly below where the leak originates. Water tends to travel diagonally within a home's structure. Finding the weak spot might take a little detective work, and these tips can help.

Examine shingles. When asphalt shingles start curling or shrinking, water can flow through the



loose areas that have opened up. Use a ladder to climb onto the roof and have a look, taking care not to damage shingles yourself.

Look at mildew stains. If you're noticing mildew stains on ceilings or in the attic, you can track the general area

of the leak, but remember that the damage to the roof will generally not be found in a straight line from the stains. However, this will give you a roadmap to the section of the roof that needs to be fixed.

Check the attic. Head up on a rainy day and take a look. If you have an attic, you can figure out where the damage to your roof is by watching rain come in. Look around with a flashlight, and mark the area where water first appears — remember it may be running along a rafter or brace. When the weather clears, use the area you marked as a guide to pinpoint the leak's source on the housetop.

Quick tip

Follow the bugs

Insects can be the key to finding what areas of a roof are leaking. If you find a sudden infestation of pests that love water, such as ants or post beetles, it can be a telltale sign of where moisture has collected.

When you need to fix a roof fast

If you have found an area on your roof that is damaged, there are some quick fixes that will help until you can make a permanent fix or recruit professional assistance.

- Place a tarp over the damaged area to prevent leaks and further damage. If you live in an area prone to damaging storms, you might want to keep a heavy-duty tarp on hand in a closet or garage.
- Fill in any holes in the roof with roofing cement or putty.
- Cover the damaged area with roofing tape. This is particularly helpful if there are loose shingles.
- If the leak is caused by a damaged shingle, replace it with a temporary one.
- Roofing tar can also be used to cover areas where shingles have been damaged.

A closer look

Why is it leaking?

Some of the most common causes of a leaky roof include:

Design

Design flaws can cause major problems over the life of a roof. These structural issues can include insufficient slope or vents that were put in the wrong places. Fixing a design flaw can be a costly proposition.

Weather

Mother Nature has been known to blow through and take roofs with her. Storms that have strong winds, heavy rains, ice or snow can weaken the wood of your roof, as well as the flashings that are designed to keep water out.

Materials

As might be expected, substandard materials and poor workmanship can cause roof failure.

Gutters

When gutters are not cleaned regularly, and there has been a buildup of leaves and other debris left inside of them, the clogs can foster roof leaks.

Removing antennas

Have you recently removed a satellite dish? If so, there may be holes in your roof that were left unsealed, allowing water to penetrate.

Maintenance

If a roof is not properly maintained, problems can crop up no matter how well it was constructed or what materials were used. By conducting roof inspections in the spring and fall of each year, homeowners can go a long way toward controlling long-term costs by having problems fixed as they find them. Don't want to do the inspecting yourself? Hire an expert to have a look.

