Preparing for a Spring Thaw and Avoiding Wet Basements

When warmer temperatures eventually return, so will melting snow and rain, which can lead to damp and wet basements. Eaves troughs are constantly neglected. If they aren't on properly or in poor shape, it'll allow moisture closure to the foundation and can cause problems.

Sometimes an eaves trough may appear ok but that doesn't mean it's working properly. It could be leaking and allowing water to accumulate close to the foundation. Foundation cracks - even small ones - can also lead to problems.

It is recommended doing a simple visual inspection to check for cracks in the foundation where moisture may enter a basement.

Other problems to watch for in your basement and around the home include: standing water; efflorescence (white, chalky stains); wet, decaying wood in contact with concrete; damp walls or floors; condensation; wet insulation; moisture-damaged finishes; musty or damp carpets; and high humidity.

The easiest way to control basement moisture is to stop water coming in and to control indoor humidity. You may be able to do some work yourself, or hire a qualified professional to trace problems and suggest remedies.

Here are some common moisture problems and solutions:

• Do eaves troughs, downspouts and grading direct surface water away from the house? Poor rain drainage will leave a large volume of water that can leak into or overwhelm basement drainage systems. Water may accumulate in the wells, leading to possible leaks through or around the window (I always recommend plastic window well covers when possible). Without exterior protection and drainage, water will eventually find its way inside. Ensure that eaves troughs and downspouts with extensions (4 – 6 feet) direct water away from the building. Slope the grade away from the house (1" down for every 12" out). Put in drainage below window wells where absent.

• Does water leak in through cracks in the foundation wall or floor? Unremedied, this may lead to continued deterioration of the house and unplanned mediation. Severe or active cracks may indicate future structural problems or even present unsafe conditions. Fill large cracks from inside (and outside if possible) with hydroscopic material that expands as it dries. You can patch small cracks from inside with cement-based material or use an injection-type foundation repair system.

• Is there a complete concrete floor? Quite often, crawlspaces have either a dirt or gravel floor. Such floors are a huge source of moisture and soil gases, so they should be covered and sealed with a moisture barrier material.

• Has the basement ever flooded? Damp-proof or waterproof the outside of foundation walls and put in a perimeter drainage system. Install a floor drain with trap and a sump pump in a covered pit. If future flooding or standing water seems unavoidable, avoid interior insulation or finishes that will be damaged by moisture — these can give mould a place to grow and make cleanup more difficult and expensive. Without a floor drain, any water spilled inside can't get out.

A sump pump may help, and should be tested monthly to ensure it's working properly.

But consider hiring a professional renovator for exterior, below-grade water protection and drainage problems, large or moving foundation cracks, concrete placement, or major structural repairs.

Correcting foundation moisture problems can improve the durability of your home and eliminate potential health hazards.