

As spring rolls in, now's the time to get a sump pump or check the one you have

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By **Roxanne Washington, The Plain Dealer**

Flood preparedness is important this time of year, when late-winter and early-spring showers can be more like hard, overwhelming downpours that pose the threat of water-filled basements.

Should your basement be equipped with a sump pump? If it is, is your sump pump in working order to handle a flood?

If you're not sure if your pump works, now is the time to find out, whether you inspect the pump yourself or call a plumber, say industry experts. Water from a sudden thaw or rainstorm seeping into basements can cause thousands of dollars in damage, according to Consumer Reports, citing information from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. A flood of just 1 inch of water in a 1,000-square-foot home can cause \$10,600 in damage.



Plain Dealer file

A homeowner and his son squeegee floodwater toward the sump pump well in their Boston-area basement. Rains, especially during the spring, bring floods and an increase in calls from homeowners asking for help in clearing their basements.

If an inspection finds that you need a new sump pump, don't procrastinate taking care of it.

"We are shipping everything we possibly can right now," says Linda Kerdolff, of Cincinnati-based **Wayne Water Systems**, which manufactures sump pumps and distributes them across the country. "We're literally working seven days a week."

The busy season is already well under way, according to Greg Faustina, owner of the Plumbing Source in Bedford Heights.

"We changed 15 pumps on Monday [March 1]," he says.

Usually, a house in a low-lying area is equipped with a sump pump when the home is built, so it's a matter of maintaining the pump and replacing it when necessary, says Frank Bauck, certified waterproofing inspector with Ohio State Waterproofing, based in Macedonia. If you live in a home without a pump and the basement floods, chances are a pump needs to be installed to carry water away from the home.

Basement flooding is mostly caused by water buildup in the soil that makes its way into the basement. A sump pump, contained in a sump pit, pumps out water from the lowest section of the basement before the water level reaches the basement floor level.

As the groundwater level rises, the water is diverted into the sump pump pit, where it is pumped out through a pipe that leads outside and away from a home's foundation.

But like anything mechanical, a sump pump eventually will need to be tweaked to keep it working or it will break down altogether.

"It's not a matter of if it's going to fail, it's when will it fail," says Faustina.

It is impossible to predict how long a sump pump will last. Manufacturers say pumps can last from three to 20 years, according a State Farm website. One manufacturer states that a life expectancy of 10 to 15 years is reasonable.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Development estimates the life expectancy of sump pumps at 10 years. The pump's life expectancy will vary due to how much the pump has run in its lifetime.

One way to check a sump pump is to remove the cover from the pump pit and slowly pour in about five gallons of water. Make sure the float rises and triggers the pump. Once the pump starts, the water level will quickly lower and the float should shut off the pump.

Sometimes the problem with a nonworking pump is float-related, according to Robert McHugh of McHugh's Plumbing Inc. in Chesterland. The float might just be hung up on something, in which case the float needs to be cleaned and adjusted.

If the pump fails to shut off when the water level drops to the bottom of the sump tank, you probably need a new float. You either can call a plumber or, if you're confident you know what you're doing, install one yourself.

Most pumps are electric, but other models work off of the home's pressurized water supply.

Tips on dealing with a flooded basement

Angie's List, a service that compiles consumer ratings of local service companies and contractors, polled some of its plumbing service providers about what to do in case your home becomes flooded, and here are the service providers' suggestions:

- 1.** Don't enter rooms with wet, sagging ceilings or water above electrical outlet level.
- 2.** If it's safe to do so, turn off circuit breakers to the affected areas and unplug electrical devices.
- 3.** If you have an insurance policy, review it to understand your coverage. Call your agent to get the process started. Take photos so you can detail damage for your claim.
- 4.** Move wet items to a dry area as soon as it's safe to do so. Remove as much excess water from furniture, etc., as possible by wiping, blotting and mopping to minimize mold growth. Place aluminum foil or wood blocks under the legs of furniture to prevent staining.
- 5.** Use wooden clothespins to keep furniture skirting off damp floors, and hang draperies with a padded hanger to avoid contact with wet carpeting or floors. Remove and prop up wet upholstery cushions for even drying.
- 6.** Remove from the floor area rugs, books, paper items, shoes or other objects that could transfer stains to the carpet. Move paintings, art objects, computers, documents and other materials that are valuable or sensitive to moisture to a safe place. Remove wet fabrics and dry them as soon as possible. Hang furs and leather goods to dry separately at room temperature.

-- Roxanne Washington

Bauck says it's a good idea to have a quality battery-operated backup sump pump in case the electric pump fails. The backup pump is attached to the primary pump and kicks in if the primary pump fails.

"The primary pump is important but the backup is just as important," Bauck says, adding that during recent storms a lot of people got hit with more water than their primary pumps could handle.

He likened a backup pump to the spare tire of an automobile.

"It's like a guy driving on a vacation with his family and no spare tire," he says. "It's not a smart thing to do."

Sump pump alarms also are highly recommended, says McHugh. As with smoke alarms, a sump pump alarm warns the occupants of the house when the water level is getting too high. Models emit a sound similar to a smoke alarm.

As with any mechanical item, it's a good idea to take preventive measures rather than dealing with the headache and cost of a breakdown.

"It's much better to schedule [an appointment with a plumber or check a sump yourself] before it becomes an emergency," says Faustina. "Because once it becomes an emergency, it's much more expensive."

