

13 Red Flags for Home Buyers

Although home sellers may not always disclose the whole truth about the condition of their home, you most likely aren't interested in paying for a professional inspection at every house you tour. Here are some recommendations as a do-it-yourself pre-inspection list to help home buyers spot potential problems up front. This list may help buyers avoid spending thousands of unwanted dollars after the purchase of their new home.

Here are some red flags to look out for when buying a home:

1. **Foundation Cracks.** Examine the foundation from the outside and inside, too, if accessible. Look for horizontal cracks or any cracks bigger than one-third of an inch, which could mean serious structural problems. If the yard slopes toward the house, look for signs of water damage in the basement.
2. **Bad or Strange Odors.** Pay attention to smells in each room of the house, and even on the outside of the house. Cigarette smoke and pet odors can be difficult to hide. If a home smells heavily of cleaning products (especially bleach) or deodorizers, the seller may be trying to cover up a stinky situation.
3. **Mildew and Mold.** Check for signs of mold on basement walls and in laundry rooms. White or green colonies of mold can also indicate excessive water in the crawl space or basement. This can mean that soil needs to be brought in around the foundation to keep the water sloping away from the house. Also, the sump pump may be missing, out of order, or improperly installed.
4. **Roof.** Look for defective roofing and/or flashings, missing or falling shingles, flat spots in the roof that trap water, and low slope roofs that have shingles.
5. **Weak Water Pressure / Old Plumbing.** Check the water pressure by running the bathroom sink and flushing the toilet at the same time. Low water flow may indicate plumbing problems, such as corroded pipes that need to be replaced. New pipes can run as high as \$15,000 in a typical 1,500-square-foot home. Also look behind the toilet and under the sink to make sure that duct tape is not being used as a replacement of tile or other water sealants.

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"Look for signs of slow water drainage of sinks, bath tubs or back up of basement floor drains," said Luigi Lungarini – Home Builder and Broker at Arabella Chambers Ltd. "This could be a sign of a cracked or rooted sewer pipe, which is a very expensive fix. Many plumbers and specialists offer sewer pipe scoping services to ascertain the current condition of the line."

6. **Pests.** Be on the lookout for insects and pests like mice, even bee or bird nests (or signs thereof like feces and markings in wood and walls). Look for wood contact with dirt in foundations - it is a termite danger, which then leads to structural damage.

7. **Ceiling and Wall Stains.** Water stains in a bathroom may indicate the shower or sink is leaking and needs to be re-caulked. It could also require ripping out tile and replacing the shower pan, which costs around \$1,500 or having a plumber come in to repair the sink. Most roof leaks that come from the ceiling could be a result of neglected flashings that seals "valleys" in the roof or around a chimney or vents, which may cost up to \$500. But roof leaks may also mean it is time to replace shingles, which could cost in the thousands of dollars. You may also want to take a look in the attic for broken trusses that could be causing leaks.

8. **Doors That Don't Close.** If more than one door won't close or swings open by itself, it may indicate a structural issue, such as a foundation that has settled or framing that is deteriorating.

9. **Locked Doors.** Inquire about any doors that are locked or marked "off limits" during your home tour. The homeowners may be trying to hide something.

10. **Old or Faulty Wiring.** Ensure all the switches and outlets in the house function properly. Flickering lights, circuits that don't work and hot outlets or faceplates are all symptoms of wiring problems. Electrical needs for today's appliances and electronics may exceed the capacity of homes built as little as 10 years ago. You may end up spending \$2,500 or more to have an electrician update the electrical system.

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11. **Leaking Water Tanks.** Water tanks should be 18 inches off the ground if in a garage. There shouldn't be too much moisture in the basement anyways.

12. **Non-functioning Windows.** Open and close all windows. Feel for irregular or large pockets of air drafts. Check for cracks and water in between double-paned windows.

13. **Environmental Hazards.** Look at the furnace for cracks and rust, which can leak carbon monoxide. Furnace flames should be blue, not red and yellow. There are self-help kits you can purchase that check for radon, water contamination and lead paint. In older homes in particular, check the for asbestos wrapped vent pipes on the furnace. While they may be fine for the moment, this could be an expensive abatement issue later when/if you need to replace the heating/cooling system.

If you enter negotiations to buy a house, your real estate agent may suggest a provision for renegotiating or backing out of the contract if a home inspector finds major problems. A minor problem now can become a major, and expensive, problem down the road, so always remember to have a home inspection done by a professional before making an offer. Most of these problems can be repaired, however, depending on the specific problem; the cost can be substantial, which makes it the deciding factor in whether you ultimately buy the house.