

Ten red flags for homeowners and homebuyers

By Erin K. Witt

Homeownership can be one of the most rewarding experiences in life. Unfortunately, it can also be one of the most expensive and time-consuming. A home requires routine maintenance to keep all systems functioning—but when the home shows signs that a problem may exist, immediate attention is necessary. Left untreated, small problems can become big, expensive disasters, says the home improvement Web site *Homestore.com*.

To help even the most novice homeowners, *Homestore.com* cites these top ten red flags that could signal a problem in your home.

Red Flag #1: The water bill suddenly increases for no obvious reason.

What it could mean: If the hose hasn't been left running for a few days by mistake, there may be an unseen water leak underground. To confirm this, shut off everything in the house and check the water meter reading over an hour. If the flow continues, there is a leak.

Red Flag #2: Slow flushing toilets and sluggish drains.

What it could mean: Because toilets dump a lot of water down waste lines quickly, they are usually the first to exhibit signs that there is a clog or trouble with a septic system. If other drains are slow too, you can be sure that it is the whole system that is not working properly and not just one cranky fixture. An untreated clog can become a big, smelly mess—and an expensive repair.

Red Flag #3: Rusty nails, dark wall stains and musty odors—but no leaks.

What it could mean: Water damage does not need a leaky pipe or roof to occur. In many homes, problems with poor ventilation can cause water damage that is as severe as a leak from a burst pipe. Often, these leaks are worse because they go undetected longer and can even lead to health problems.

Red Flag #4: Doors and windows will not close or keep opening, and mysterious cracks keep getting larger.

What it could mean: These are signs that a home is settling unevenly. Small expansion cracks in concrete or plaster are usually nothing to worry about, but if there are more problems, call a structural engineer.

Red Flag #5: Continuously having to relight a pilot light on an appliance.

What it could mean: The thermocouple—a safety device that shuts off the gas to an appliance when it senses that the pilot light is no longer burning—is probably bad. A thermocouple is a “fail safe” device—when it goes bad, it performs its intended function regardless of need. So although your pilot may be on, the thermocouple will still continue to shut it and the gas off.

Red Flag #6: Clothes come out of the dryer too hot, or still damp.

What it could mean: Often, lint will clog dryer vents that are too long or kinked. In some severe cases, this could even lead to fires. To solve the problem, dryer vents should be kept as short as possible and cleaned at least once a year.

Red Flag #7: Flu and allergy-like symptoms are experienced constantly in the home.

What it could mean: Dirty air filters and dirty ducts in a home's heating and cooling system can fill the home with mold and bacteria, causing illness or allergic reactions in some people. Other causes of these symptoms could include adhesives and chemicals in furniture and rugs, or a lack of fresh air circulating into the home.

Red Flag #8: Hot switches and plugs, sizzling electric boxes, dimming lights, and tripping breakers.

What it could mean: These are symptoms of a seriously overburdened electrical system. Switches and plugs that get hot when you use them, sizzles and buzzes in electric boxes, lights that dim when you turn on other appliances, and breakers and fuses that continually need to be reset or replaced are red flags saying the electrical system needs an upgrade. Unchecked, this problem could escalate into a fire hazard.

Red Flag #9: Small holes in wood surfaces, mud tunnels along foundations, and sawdust.

What it could mean: These are classic signs of a termite invasion. These pests are a problem everywhere, but appear more frequently in southern states. Because termites do most of their damage where it cannot be seen—inside the wood—homeowners should always be on the lookout for warning signs. Have the home inspected if termite infestation is a possibility.

Red Flag #10: Small piles of sand around roof drains and gutters.

What it could mean: When a tar paper roof starts to go bad, the small grains of sand stuck to the paper start to fall off and flow down. When enough grains have fallen off that bare patches are evident, it's time for a new roof.