

## How to Keep Your Gutters and Downspouts Flowing

Gutters and downspouts work hard to protect your house from moisture damage. If gutters leak or downspouts are clogged, water can spill out and accumulate near foundations, soaking the soil and causing foundation walls to settle. In worst-case scenarios, moisture-laden soil presses in on basement walls, causing bulging and cracking. Water can even be forced inside by means of hydrostatic pressure.

Keeping gutters and downspouts in good condition requires regular maintenance. Mike Gibson of Quality Gutter Services in Des Moines, Iowa, advises doing this chore twice each year -- in spring and in the fall. "Yes, it can be messy," says Gibson, "and you might get dirty. But it's definitely worth it."

### Steps To Clean Your Gutters

- Clean leaves, sticks, needles and seeds from gutters, scooping out debris with a garden trowel or gloved hand.
- Don't try to remove the debris with a hose because that may cause downspouts to clog.
- Remove the pasty goo made up from the tiny granules from asphalt roofing shingles that have mixed with dirt and water.
- Flush out residual matter, using a garden hose.
- To clean downspouts, turn on the hose full blast and thread it into the drain opening.
- Check gutters after flushing for pools that indicate low spots. Gutters should be sloped about one vertical inch for every 15 to 20 horizontal feet so that they drain properly. Adjust gutters as necessary.

### Repairing Gutters

- Install new hangers to hold gutters firmly in place. Typically, gutters are attached with straps, hangers or long nails inserted through metal collars -- a system called "spikes and ferrules."
- Don't bother replacing straps, re-nailing old spikes or adding new spikes. Because you must pry up roofing materials to replace straps, it's easier to make repairs using individual gutter hangers with self-tapping screws, available at home improvement centers.
- Also replace spikes with gutter screws and matching ferrules. "Over time a spike is always going to push out," says Gibson. "A gutter screw really has holding power."

### Fix Leaks

Fix leaks at seams with silicone sealer. Although patch kits are available for repairing rust holes in steel gutters, the patches will prove to be only temporary. "If you've got rust holes in steel gutters," says Gibson, "they're pretty much finished. It's better to get new ones."

### Replacing Gutters

If you need to replace your gutter, Tom Wood of Emerald Gutter Services in Eugene, Ore., says steel gutters generally perform better than aluminum or vinyl. "Aluminum gutters move too much during weather changes," says Wood. "The expansion and contraction causes nails and screws to loosen up. And vinyl comes in 10-foot lengths, meaning there are lots of seams that need to be sealed."

Both steel and aluminum can be installed without intermittent seams, and the best steel gutters feature baked-on enamel finishes with 40-year warranties. According to Wood, expect to pay about \$450 for a professional to install new gutters and downspouts on a typical two-story suburban house.

### A Safety Tip

Remember that gutter maintenance often means working on a ladder. As you work, make safety a priority. Make sure your ladder is firmly planted, and don't stretch to make repairs.