

How to deal with ice dams

An ice dam is exactly what the name implies—a blockage of ice at the edge of a roof that dams up and blocks the water behind it. Ice dams are caused by snow melting from the roof and the melting water that flows down to the edge. When the temperatures turn cold, the water freezes and begins to build up. If this happens often enough, the result can damage roofs and lead to water damage inside and outside your home.

Generally, a warm attic (which leads to snow melt on the roof) and colder eaves (which allow for freezing and refreezing) are to blame. If the water building up behind the dam gets high enough, it can be forced under the shingles and leak into the house. Be on the lookout for water leaking from window trim or for wet spots on the ceiling close to the walls. Even one occurrence can result in stained woodwork and drywall. Repeated leaks can rot wooden parts of the roof and house frame.

Getting the snow and ice off the roof will stop ice dams from forming and keep your home safe from leaks. The easiest (and least expensive) way to do this is with a snow shovel or rake to pull or push the snow and ice away. While it may result in a face full of snow, it's a quick fix that can be used until a better solution can be obtained. Be careful and use the proper precautions if you have to climb on the roof to accomplish this.

Keeping your attic cool or a constant temperature is one crucial way you can deal with ice dams. Adding insulation to the attic floor up to about R 45-50 will help, too. Seal any floor openings before

you insulate, and caulk around pipe and wiring openings.

Once you've insulated, you need to eliminate moisture and condensation that gets into the attic. That's where ventilation comes in. The minimum recommended ventilation is one square foot for every 150 square feet of attic floor space. Adding more than this helps. Continuous soffit vents and ridge vents are the best choice. Attic fans will not help as they pull air and moisture from the house into the attic, creating a new source of condensation in the attic.


If your roof design or attic layout makes insulation impractical, consider installing metal flashing along the eaves and on the roof above the attic. This will cover the area where ice forms and also serve to let the snow and ice slide off the roof. It will also help prevent water from flowing up the roofing, thus helping to prevent ice dams.

A metal roof, while expensive, will also eliminate ice dams. The ice and snow can slide off easily and there are no horizontal seams for water to infiltrate.

Another practical option is to run electricity along the eaves to melt snow and ice. This "heat tracing" is relatively easy to buy and install. And because you only need to use it when an ice dam is forming, it doesn't significantly add to your utility bill.

While nobody really likes to go out and work on the house in the winter, some things can't be done at any other time. And unless you prepare in advance for the prevention of ice dams, you really don't have any other choice than to go outside.


—By Bob Grimson, special



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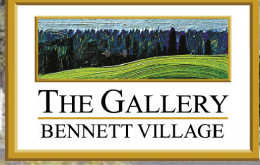
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