

## **FIX IT UP!**

*Bruce Turner*

### The Two-Word Curse

To a business owner, it's "IRS audit." To a baseball pitcher, it's "Barry Bonds." And to the average homeowner, the two-word phrase that causes gut-tightening dread is "dry rot."

Dry rot is the fungal scourge that some people colorfully but accurately refer to as "wood cancer," because once established, it spreads to any adjacent wood. Dry rot is something of a misnomer, since it's caused by moisture – any long-term leak, drip or condensation touching wood can trigger it. Dry rot starts out as thin grey strands that can become moldy in appearance, and it eventually softens lumber or drywall into a dry, crumbly substance that can be crushed with your fingers. It can happen anywhere in your home – outside walls, inside walls, sub-floors – that gets wet frequently.

If you know what to look for, dry rot can be spotted early. A discoloration, irregularity or softening of any wood surface can be an early sign of the fungus. Run your fingers over it – you may even be able to feel the mold spores.

Unfortunately, many homeowners don't find out they have dry rot until the worst possible moment – when they're about to sell. A home inspection that turns up dry rot can torpedo a sale, so immediate repairs are required, and that doesn't leave much time to gather and assess contractor bids. So if you're thinking of selling your home anytime soon, inspect it now – it's a good idea anyway, and if the news is bad you'll have time to weigh your alternatives.

The first step in repairing dry rot is to find and stop the water leak. Then comes the treatment – major surgery. All of the decayed wood has to be cut away, as well as the good wood for a couple of feet around it. Replacement lumber must be treated with a fungus prevention compound (it's an ugly black gunk, but it works). Most people will have to hire a pro to do this kind of work, and estimates can be iffy, because you don't know how far the rot has gone until you open up the walls and look. It's not fun, and it's not cheap.

The really good news is that most dry rot is preventable, and you can do it yourself. Take a Saturday once a year and work your way through your home, looking for signs of chronic leaks – water stains, drip trails, damp areas – especially around windows and sills, doors, pipes, bathroom fixtures, the kitchen sink and the laundry room. Use your eyes, your hands AND your nose – moisture-related fungus gives off a telltale mushroom smell. (Many building inspection companies use specially-trained sniffer dogs called Rot Hounds.) Check your ceiling carefully for water stains – roof and gutter leaks, especially in flat-roofed homes, are often a source of fungus problems.

And if you find signs of water intrusion, grab your caulking gun and start sealing. Caulking is cheap, easy and effective, and it doesn't require any expertise or fancy equipment. You can seal off a leak in a few seconds and prevent years of problems and thousands of dollars in repair costs down the road. I'm always amazed by how many of my customers have premonitions of dry rot – they noticed water intrusion years ago but never got around to fixing it. Don't wait – caulk those leaks now. It will save you big bucks later.

*Bruce Turner is president of TurnerBuilt, Inc. He can be reached at [bturner@turnerbuilt.com](mailto:bturner@turnerbuilt.com).*