THE SMART HOMEOWNER

THE HOME WARNING SIGNS HANDBOOK

Spot problems early. Understand the signs.
Know what to do next.



PAY ATTENTION. PROTECT YOUR HOME.

How to use this handbook

1. **Start with Chapter 01.** Build a short house profile, collect essential contacts, and learn the difference between identifying a control and knowing how to use it safely.
2. **Use Chapters 02–07 when something changes.** Choose the entry that matches the observation. Read its safety boundaries before gathering more information; you do not have to name the failed part.
3. **Use Chapter 08 to follow through.** Keep open concerns separate from recurring maintenance and give every next action a responsible person.
4. **Return to the worksheets when needed.** Copy or print the pages relevant to your house. Keep their instructions and safety context with them, and leave unknown information marked as unknown.

For immediate danger, get to safety and contact emergency services before looking up an entry or completing a form. Do not recreate a leak, fault, or other hazardous condition to improve your notes.

Volumes in the worked examples use U.S. gallons. Keep the original units from your bills and equipment records, and confirm any conversion you need. Bracketed labels such as **[WP-11]** identify the supporting reference in the source list at the end of that chapter. A citation is not an endorsement of this handbook or a product recommendation.

Chapter 02 — Water & Plumbing

Follow the water through the house

Water enters the house through a supply system, reaches fixtures and appliances, and leaves through drainage. Some equipment also produces condensate that needs its own route away. When water appears somewhere unexpected, the first useful question is which part of that journey needs investigation.

You do not have to diagnose the whole system. Learn to distinguish the observation from the explanation. “The cabinet is wet” is an observation. “The faucet needs replacing” is a conclusion that still needs support.

This chapter gives you five practical starting points: a wet cabinet, aging washer connections, water near the heater, unexplained consumption, and recurring drainage trouble. For each, you will learn what information matters, which actions are appropriate for a homeowner, and how to make a service request that preserves the important details.

The goal is to address the source, account for wet materials, and keep enough history to make a recurrence easier to investigate. Those decisions can help you avoid incomplete work; they do not guarantee a particular amount saved.

Read this first: if you encounter gas odor, a carbon monoxide alarm, water near electrical equipment, hot-water spray, sewage backup, or an immediate threat to people, follow the safety instructions in the relevant entry before gathering information. Do not investigate through a hazard to complete a worksheet.

Entry W01 — Dampness Under the Sink



Figure 2. Describe the visible damp area without choosing a cause. Illustrative scene; the image does not identify a failed component.

The moment worth paying attention to

You reach under the sink for a trash bag and notice that the bottom of a cardboard box is damp. There is no obvious puddle. The faucet looks normal from above.

Before you put the box somewhere else and close the door, pause. You have found an observation worth explaining. The useful questions are where the moisture is, whether it is still appearing, and whether anything nearby makes it unsafe to investigate.

A cabinet is an awkward place to inspect. Storage hides surfaces, plumbing runs close together, and electrical equipment may share the space. You can gather useful information without putting your head under the pipes or taking a connection apart.

Start with the surroundings

Look from outside the cabinet. If water is near an outlet, cord, garbage disposal, or other electrical equipment, do not reach into the wet area or touch the equipment. CPSC warns against touching wet appliances that remain connected to electricity. Get qualified assistance rather than attempting to unplug equipment through a wet space. [WP-03]

If water is actively spreading, stop ordinary use of the affected sink and associated equipment while arranging help. Water on the floor can also make access unsafe. Do not reach a valve by stepping into water that could be electrically energized.

An identified, safely accessible water shutoff can be useful if you already know how to operate it. If you are unsure which valve it is, cannot reach it safely, or it will not move normally, contact a plumber or your water utility for assistance. This entry does not ask you to force or repair a valve.

The timing is useful information

It helps to understand the basic layout before describing it. The sink has a water-supply side that brings water to the faucet and a drain side that carries used water away. The faucet controls delivery into the bowl; closing it does not necessarily isolate the supply connections beneath it. That is why turning off the faucet and stopping a leak are not always the same event.

The larger drain assembly beneath the bowl is a different part of the system. A cabinet may also contain a disposal, dishwasher connections, or a filter. Identify what you recognize and leave the rest unnamed. A wide photograph can communicate the arrangement without you having to identify every hose correctly.

This distinction is useful when requesting service, but it is not a reason to tighten whichever connection looks wet. The visible wet spot and the failed component may not be the same location. Leave that assessment to the plumber.

For the plumber, “under the sink is wet” is a starting point. “I noticed water there after using the faucet, but I have not operated it again” supplies additional context.

Manufacturer troubleshooting for some faucets distinguishes between leakage that occurs continuously and leakage noticed after faucet use. It also depends on the specific model. Use timing as a clue to report, without deciding that it proves which component failed. [WP-04]

Write down what you already know. Do not run water repeatedly to make the problem happen again. If an appliance was operating when you noticed the moisture, include that fact. If you do not know when it started, say so.

What to record from a safe position

If the area has no apparent electrical or other hazard and you can observe it without disturbing equipment, a battery-powered light can help you see the cabinet. Leave hoses, wiring, valves, and pipe joints alone.

Record these details:

Observation	Useful description
Location	Left rear corner of the cabinet; below the sink bowl; near an opening in the back panel
Material affected	Cabinet floor, stored packaging, pipe exterior, adjacent flooring
Appearance	A bead of water, a damp patch, discoloration, a raised edge
Timing	First noticed this morning; seen after ordinary use; starting time unknown
Extent	Confined to the cabinet or also visible outside it
History	Recent faucet work, appliance installation, or an earlier repair

Take one photo that shows the overall arrangement and another that shows the visible concern, if both can be taken safely. Keep the unedited originals. A tightly cropped image may omit information a professional needs to understand what they are seeing.

Do not move electrical equipment or disturb suspected mold to improve a photograph.

Three situations that need different descriptions

Illustrative examples:

A damp item with no known cause. You find wet packaging but cannot tell where the moisture came from. Report the uncertainty and any visible changes. Avoid deciding that it must have been a spill merely because no drip is visible at that moment.

New water following ordinary sink use. You have already seen moisture appear around the same time the sink was being used. Stop using the affected fixture and tell the plumber about that sequence. You do not need to repeat the event for proof.

A previously repaired area becomes damp again. Retrieve the repair date and description, if available. Tell the contractor what has returned and what has changed. Keep the old and new observations together; they form a clearer history than a series of disconnected service requests.

The examples are about how to describe a situation. They do not identify its cause or establish a safe waiting period.

The repair and the wet materials are separate questions

When a leak is addressed, ask what needs to happen to the materials that got wet. A service visit may cover plumbing work without covering cabinet restoration or moisture assessment.

EPA recommends addressing water problems promptly and drying water-damaged materials quickly. Its guidance discusses a 24–48-hour drying window to help prevent mold growth. Treat that as a reason to act promptly, not permission to wait or a guarantee that damage is absent before a deadline. [WP-01]

If there is suspected hidden mold, significant damage, or water that may be contaminated, describe that when seeking help. EPA recommends experienced professional assistance for sewage or other contaminated-water damage. [WP-01]

Useful questions include:

- What source did you identify, and what evidence supports that finding?
- Is the source addressed, or is this a temporary measure?

- Which surrounding materials need assessment or drying?
- Does another specialist need to be involved?
- What should I watch for afterward, and whom should I contact if it returns?

Ask for the answers in the service notes. That gives you a record you can use later.

Make sure the cabinet is included in the discussion

If a quote includes replacing part of the cabinet, ask what condition supports replacement. If it covers only plumbing, ask who will assess the wet cabinet and adjacent materials. Keep those unanswered questions open after the plumbing repair.

Your useful next step

For active or recurring moisture of uncertain origin, arrange a plumbing assessment and describe any spreading water, electrical proximity, or affected materials when you call. Let the service provider know immediately if the condition is changing.

You can use this message, filling in only facts you observed:

> I first noticed moisture in the cabinet under my kitchen sink on [date/time], at [location]. It began [known timing, or “at an unknown time”]. The visible area includes [materials]. I have stopped using the affected fixture. Please advise how urgently it should be assessed and whether the wet materials need separate attention.

After service, keep the description of the completed work and any follow-up instructions. Note the date you next check the area from a safe position. If moisture returns, contact the provider rather than simply replacing the towel or container.

The habit to keep: make room for a clear view of the area during ordinary housekeeping, and give unexplained moisture a specific next step.

1. Your household water record

Information	Your record
Date prepared or updated	
Water supply: utility, private well, or shared system	
Water utility or supply service contact	
Sewer or septic system	
Sewer emergency or septic service contact	
Plumbing service contact	
Main water shutoff location, if confirmed	
Who confirmed how to operate it safely, and when	
Meter location or utility usage portal	
Meter unit and which uses it measures	
Washer manufacturer and model	
Inlet-hose installation date or “unknown”	
Applicable hose instructions and replacement interval	
Water heater manufacturer, model, and installation date	

Sources for this sample

The complete W01 entry and household water record are excerpted from the first-edition handbook. These references support the cited guidance, not a diagnosis of a particular home.

WP-01. U.S. EPA. A Brief Guide to Mold, Moisture and Your Home.
Moisture control, drying, and contaminated-water context.
Read the supporting source

WP-02. U.S. EPA. Mold Cleanup in Your Home.
Cleanup scope and when experienced assistance may be needed.
Read the supporting source

WP-03. U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. Flood safety guidance.
Wet electrical equipment, suspected gas leakage, and carbon monoxide precautions. The source was issued in a flood context.
Read the supporting source

WP-04. Moen. Kitchen Faucet: Leaking Under the Sink Base.
Model-specific information and the relevance of observed leak timing; not generic repair instructions.
Read the supporting source

For immediate danger, get to safety and contact emergency services. Observe only when safe, do not recreate a fault, and follow instructions for the actual equipment and qualified professional guidance.