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BASEMENT WALL COATINGS

If you're struggling with a damp basement, you may be tempted to "solve" the problem by painting your basement walls with a waterproof coating that promises to keep your walls dry. Don't do it! Not only do these waterproof coatings fail to deal with the underlying causes of basement moisture, they often cause problems of their own.

Before you try to eliminate basement moisture, you need to determine its source. The easiest way to do this is to tape a square of plastic (a piece cut from a garbage bag will work) securely to the inside of your basement wall. Wait a few days, and then check to see if moisture has collected on the surface. If the "room side" of the plastic is damp, the moisture has condensed out of the air onto the wall surface. (Since basement walls are underground, they are cooler than the other walls in your house.) Such condensation is a frequent occurrence in summer, when the humidity is higher. Painting the wall will not solve this problem; you'll need to run a dehumidifier or open more windows to increase air movement.

If you find moisture underneath the plastic, on the "wall side," you'll know that it's exterior moisture that has come through the wall or the floor. The most effective way to deal with this problem is by diverting the water *before* it collects alongside the wall and starts to move through it. Try snaking your storm sewers, re-grading any lawn area that slopes toward the foundation wall, caulking any joints between the driveway and the house, and correcting any sagging, loose, or leaking gutters. In most cases, these measures should eliminate your water problems.

But why not apply a waterproof coating to the inside of your basement? Because these coatings can create more damage by locking water into the wall, instead of letting it travel through the masonry and dry out in your basement. Sometimes, moisture trapped in the masonry will build up so much pressure that spalling occurs, where big chunks of the wall chip off. Or, the water will rise through the masonry until it reaches the wood sill plate above it, and start to rot the wood. If you already have a waterproof coating on your basement wall, you'll need to be vigilant about your outdoor drainage, so this type of damage doesn't occur.

Meanwhile the best material to use on your basement wall is a stain-blocking primer (i.e., Kilz™) or a good-quality, mildew-resistant latex house paint. Either of these paints will allow the walls to "breathe," so moisture can move through the wall and evaporate. A white powdery substance, called **efflorescence,** may collect on the wall. This is normal; the efflorescence is made up of salts, dissolved in the surface water, that are left behind when the water evaporates. It won't damage the wall and can be easily removed with a dilute solution of muriatic acid and a scrub brush.