

How to Spot Trouble Early: A Guide to Roof Leak Inspection

Roof leaks are one of those problems that start small and get expensive fast. A water stain on the ceiling might seem like a minor annoyance, but behind that stain, moisture is working its way through the underlayment, soaking the insulation, and often damaging the decking before you even notice. I have crawled through enough attics and climbed onto enough roofs to know that the earlier you catch a leak, the less it costs. A thorough roof leak inspection does not require a degree in engineering, but it does require knowing where to look and what to look for.

Most homeowners only think about their roof when something goes wrong. That is understandable. Roofs are out of sight and out of mind. But the truth is that a roof leak inspection, done twice a year, can save thousands of dollars in repairs. The best time to do it is in the spring after the winter freeze-thaw cycles and again in the fall before the heavy rains arrive. In Texas, where I work, we also add a check after any major hailstorm. Hail can fracture shingles and dent flashing in ways that are invisible from the ground but will leak the next time it rains.

Start on the Ground, Work Your Way Up

A good [roof leak inspection](#) begins at the ground. Walk around the house and look for granules from asphalt shingles in the gutters. A few granules are normal; a lot means the shingles are aging and losing their protective coating. Check the downspouts for blockages. A clogged downspout can cause water to back up and overflow the gutter, which then runs down the fascia and soaks the soffit. That water intrusion often shows up as peeling paint or rot along the eaves, not as a ceiling stain, so it is easy to miss.

While you are at ground level, look at the soffit vents. If you see stains or sagging, moisture is getting trapped in the attic. That leads to mold and rot over time. Also check the fascia boards for any gaps or rot where they meet the roofline. Those are common entry points for water that will eventually travel down the wall cavity and show up as a mysterious leak on the first floor.

AUSTIN ROOFING COMPANY

ROOF REPAIR & REPLACEMENT

Get Up There Safely

If you are comfortable on a ladder and the pitch of your roof is not too steep, you can do a more detailed inspection from above. Always use a ladder stabilizer to keep the ladder from shifting, and never lean the ladder against the gutter. Gutters are not structural. I have seen too many bent gutters and bruised egos from that mistake. OSHA recommends a 4:1 ratio for ladder angle, meaning for every four feet of height, the base should be one foot from the wall. That is good advice. Also, use roof jacks if you plan to walk on the roof. They attach to the roof deck and give you a foothold so you do not slide.

Once you are up there, start at the bottom and work your way up. Look at the flashing first. Flashing is the metal or rubber material that seals the joints where the roof meets a wall, a chimney, or a skylight. It is the most common place for leaks. Over time, flashing can pull away from the wall, develop cracks, or the sealant around it can dry out. Press on it gently. If it feels brittle or loose, that is a problem. Pay special attention to the skylight. Skylights are notorious for leaking because they create a break in the roof plane. The flashing around a skylight must be installed perfectly, and even then, the rubber gaskets can fail after a few years.

Check the Valleys and the Penetrations

The valleys are the V-shaped channels where two roof slopes meet. They carry a lot of water during a rainstorm. If the shingles in the valley are cracked, missing, or curled, water can get under them and run down the decking. I always check valleys carefully because they are hard to seal once they start leaking. The same goes for any roof penetration: plumbing vents, exhaust fans, and roof jacks should all have boots or collars that are intact. If the rubber boot around a vent pipe is cracked, replace it. That is a cheap fix that stops a leak before it starts.

Also inspect the underlayment if you have access to the attic. The underlayment is the layer between the decking and the shingles. It is your last line of defense. If you see water stains on the underside of the decking, the underlayment has failed or was never installed correctly. In that case, patching the shingles above will not fix the leak. You have to address the underlayment.

Tools That Help You See the Invisible

Sometimes you cannot see the leak with your eyes. Water can travel along a truss or a pipe and show up three feet away from the entry point. That is where tools like a moisture meter and thermal imaging become valuable. A moisture meter can detect damp wood behind drywall or under shingles. Thermal imaging cameras show temperature differences that indicate wet insulation or hidden moisture. I carry both on every roof leak inspection I do. They are not toys; they are professional tools that NRCA-certified inspectors use. But you can rent them from equipment suppliers if you want to do your own check.

For a quick check without special tools, go into the attic on a rainy day. Bring a flashlight and look for drips, dark spots on the wood, or a musty smell. The smell is often the first sign of mold. If you find mold, do not disturb it. Mold spores can be harmful. Call a professional who knows how to remediate it safely.



When to Call a Pro

There are some things you can fix yourself, like replacing a cracked shingle or clearing a gutter. But a full roof leak inspection that covers all the potential problem areas is best done by someone who does it every day. A pro will look at the flashing, the valleys, the skylight, the chimney, the vent boots, the soffit, the fascia, the gutters, and the downspouts. They will check the underlayment if it is visible and use a moisture meter to confirm areas of concern. They will also know the local building codes and the requirements of manufacturers like GAF, CertainTeed, and Owens Corning, because those companies have specific installation guidelines that affect warranty coverage.

If you call a roofer for an inspection, ask if they follow NRCA standards. The National Roofing Contractors Association publishes best practices that many reputable companies follow. Also ask if they offer a free estimate. Many companies, including the one I work with in Austin, provide free, no-obligation evaluations. That is a good sign. It means they are confident in their ability to find and fix problems without pressuring you into a sale.

Prevention Is Cheaper Than Repair

One of the most preventable causes of roof leaks is ice dams. In colder climates, ice dams form when snow melts on a warm roof and refreezes at the cold eaves. The ice block prevents water from draining, and that water backs up under the shingles. In Texas, we do not get much snow, but we do get freeze-thaw cycles that can cause similar issues if the attic is not properly ventilated. Good attic ventilation keeps the roof deck cold in winter and hot in summer, which reduces the risk of ice dams and also helps the shingles last longer.

Another simple preventive measure is keeping your gutters clean. Clogged gutters are the number one cause of water intrusion at the eaves. When gutters are full of leaves and debris, water overflows and soaks the fascia and soffit. That moisture can travel up under the shingles and cause rot. I recommend cleaning gutters at least twice a year, more if you have overhanging trees. While you are at it, check the downspouts for clogs. A downspout that is blocked will cause the gutter to fill and overflow, which defeats the whole purpose of having gutters in the first place.

Understand the Materials

Not all roofs are the same. Asphalt shingles from GAF or CertainTeed are common in Texas because they handle heat well, but they have a shorter lifespan than metal or tile. Metal roofs, like standing seam, are more durable but require different inspection techniques. The fasteners on a metal roof can loosen over time, and the seams can fail if they were not properly locked. Tile roofs are heavy and the tiles can crack, but the underlayment is usually more robust. Know what your roof is made of before you inspect it. That knowledge will guide what you look for.



Owens Corning makes underlayment products that are very durable, but no underlayment is perfect. If the shingles above it are damaged, the underlayment will eventually fail. That is why a roof leak inspection should always include a visual check of the shingles themselves. Look for curling, cracking, missing tabs, and granule loss. If you see bare spots where the asphalt is exposed, the shingles are nearing the end of their life. Plan for a replacement soon, because patching will only buy you a year or two.

Final Thoughts

A roof leak inspection is not a luxury; it is maintenance. It takes a couple of hours and costs nothing if you do it yourself, or a reasonable fee if you hire a pro. Either way, it beats the cost of repairing water-damaged drywall, insulation, and framing. The next time you see a water stain on the ceiling, do not just paint over it. Find the source. Climb up, look at the flashing, check the valleys, and inspect the skylight. Use a moisture meter if you have one. And if you are not comfortable on a ladder, call someone who is. The peace of mind is worth it.