

## Bathroom Wall and Tile Maintenance

By Rick Bunzel, Mountain View Property Inspections



Water is both a blessing and a curse in a home. Fresh water when and where we want it is a necessity. Water where we don't want it such as the attic, basement or behind the walls is a curse and an expensive one at that. As an inspector we are on a constant lookout for water leaks and in even new homes, we find them. At the toilet we look for leaks around the water line and signs of staining or mushiness in the flooring. Under the sink we look for stains or dampness, which would indicate leaks. In homes that are five years it is common to find these signs. Frequently, the grout has cracked or fallen out, caulking has dried out and pulled away from the wall. A hairline crack in grouting will let water seep behind bathroom tiles. Water that has spilled from the tub will find its way through the gap between the tub and flooring. If you catch these in time, you can avoid expensive damage and the likelihood that you may have mold or mildew growing behind the walls or under the flooring. The tips found below will also apply to the kitchen tile, sinks and counters.

Maintaining the grout and caulking is a simple process that most homeowners can handle. If you catch the cracks or gaps early enough, you can scrape out existing joints (a knife, awl or screwdriver works fine), clean with acetone or paint thinner and re-grout or caulk. Grout is typically sold as a powder that is mixed with water. White grout is available premixed. Caulk or silicon sealer comes in a tube in a number of colors. If you have colored grout, you may have to experiment with grout samples to get a good color match — aging affects the color — even if you use a leftover supply of the original material. Grout or caulk is now available in mildew resistant formulas. If you can get it, I recommend it as the shower is the main source of mold or mildew in a home.

Preparation is the key to successfully re-applying grout or caulk. Remove as much of the old material as possible. Brush or vacuum the old material away and clean with paint thinner or acetone. Soaps and shampoo residue will prevent a good bond between the areas to be sealed. If leaks have been occurring over a longer period of time, you may find that the tiles are loose. This normally indicates that the water has been seeping into the area behind the walls. If adjacent tiles are loose, don't expect to secure them by fixing the grout. Grout helps to bind tiles together, but it can't keep them in place. Before you fix the grout, pry off loose tiles and cut down the ridges of old adhesive on both the tile and on the wall or floor. Let the exposed area dry, and then reset the tile with adhesive and grout the surrounding seams. If the damage is extensive, then it may be time to call in experts.

When do you use caulking over grout? Typically if you are working with tiles you will use grout. However, where the tub and tile come together you will use a caulk. The reason for this is that caulk (or a silicon based sealer) is flexible and will resist cracking. So the basic rule is that anytime you have different material to seal that will have some movement; faucets, tubs, toilets, sink rims you will want to use a caulk.

Rick Bunzel is the Principle Inspector at Mountain View Property Inspections. If you would like to know more about the systems within your home go to **[WWW.MVPinspection.com](http://WWW.MVPinspection.com)** If you have questions or comments, Rick Bunzel can be contacted at Mountain View Property Inspections @ 303-443-9063 or [MVPInspection@attbi.com](mailto:MVPInspection@attbi.com)