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SUMP PUMP GUIDE: 101

What is a sump pump?

- A sump pump is the heart of a basement or crawl space waterproofing system. This electrically powered device does the "heavy lifting" to keep your basement dry.

- It pumps water out of your basement (or crawl space) after the water collects in a sump pit dug into the floor. Sometimes sump pumps drain the water into the drainage pipe system, and sometimes they simply pump the water outside.

- Sump pump pits should be covered at all times and installed by a licensed and insured plumber.

What if my sump pump is not working?

It is critical for your sump pump to always be working, or the pit can overflow and flood your basement. Sump pump malfunction, a power surge, or complete loss of power will cause the pump to stop working. Take personal safety precautions if there is standing water in the basement—call a professional and make sure that water has not come in contact with low-mounted electrical outlets before you reset any circuits.

- Have a backup power supply system in case the primary power system for the sump pump fails or is out for a long period of time. New sump pumps have a battery backup for these situations. If you do not have a backup, consider adding one, especially if there is high flood potential in the area.

- Make sure your pump is not clogged. Remove the pump, if possibl,e and check for any corrosion, damage, or blockage of the pump components.

- Make sure the pump is plugged directly into a grounded three-prong receptacle and the cord is in good condition. If a Ground Fault Circuit Interrupter (GFCI) outlet is installed at the receptacle, make sure it is in working condition at all times. In damp areas, the GFCI breakers may trip, effectively shutting off the sump pump. Ideally, the receptacle should be installed 18" above the floor and extension cords are discouraged.

- Ensure the pump itself is standing upright. Vibrations during operation can cause it to fall or tilt to one side, jamming the float arm. The float arm is a vital part of the sump pump—rising and falling triggers the pump to start and stop.

- Make sure the vent hole in the discharge pipe is clear. During cold weather, water can freeze in the discharge line—periodically checking this in the winter should be part of your sump pump maintenance program.

- When you are working around or in the sump pit, disconnect/de-energize the power to the sump pump to decrease electrical shock potential. Wear rubber boots in any situation where there is water on the floor and electrical cords may be involved.

- If all else fails, you can turn to a hand-operated bilge pump or a bucket to move water out of the pit during a power outage emergency.

How do I take care of my sump pump and pit?

Like other major appliances, sump pumps usually need some type of cleaning and general maintenance on a regular schedule. In some areas of the country, it is best to clean the sump pump yearly, while other areas may need attention numerous times per year.

- General maintenance on a sump pump usually just involves cleaning it out. The pump will get clogged with gravel, dirt, sand, and other debris carried in by the water from the sump pit. Too much debris will clog the sump pump and can make it stop working completely.

- Check the sump pit regularly before the local wet season, and before and after major storms. Manufacturer instructions should be used as the primary guide for pump installation and maintenance.

- If your pump is running all the time, this may indicate you have the wrong size pump or the float valve needs to be adjusted.

- Periodically pour a bucket of water into the pit to make sure the pump starts automatically and the water drains quickly once the pump is on.

- Sump pumps should be replaced between 5 – 10 years, depending on the quality.