

When to Remove Water Yourself After a Leak and When to Call a Pro

Standing in a puddle after a pipe bursts or a heavy storm pushes water into your basement is a moment that tests your patience. Your first instinct might be to grab a mop and a bucket, and for small spills that is exactly what you should do. But knowing when to remove water yourself after a leak and when to hand the job to a professional can save you thousands in repairs and spare you from long-term mold problems.

I have seen plenty of homeowners in St. Louis try to tackle a flooded laundry room with a shop vac and a few fans. Sometimes it works. Other times they call us a week later because the room still smells damp and the drywall is starting to crumble. The difference often comes down to the source of the water, the amount of it, and how quickly you can act.

Assess the Situation First

Before you decide to [remove water yourself after a leak](#), take a minute to figure out what kind of water you are dealing with. Clean water from a supply line is one thing. Gray water from a washing machine overflow or black water from a sewage backup is something else entirely. If the water has any chance of being contaminated, put down the shop vac and call a professional restoration crew. Protective gear like rubber gloves and boots can only do so much, and the health risks from bacteria and sewage are not worth saving a few hundred dollars.

Also consider the volume. A wet/dry vacuum handles a few gallons easily. A basement with two inches of standing water across a thousand square feet holds more than a thousand gallons. Even the best shop vac becomes a toy at that scale. You would need a sump pump or a truck-mounted extraction unit to make real progress.

When DIY Water Removal Makes Sense

If the water is clean, the area is small, and you caught it within the first few hours, you can usually handle it yourself. Grab a wet/dry vacuum or a shop vac and start pulling water off the floor. Move furniture and rugs out of the way first so you can reach every wet spot. After you have removed the standing water, set up a dehumidifier and an air mover to speed up floor drying. Air movers are basically high-velocity fans that keep air circulating across wet surfaces. Without them, moisture gets trapped under cabinets and behind baseboards, which is where mold starts.

One thing I always tell homeowners: do not skip the carpet cleaner. If the leak soaked a carpet, rent a carpet cleaner with a strong extraction function. Running a dry vacuum over wet carpet just pushes water deeper into the pad. You need a machine that pulls water out through suction. Afterward, pull the carpet up slightly at the edges so air can reach the subfloor drying area. A moisture meter helps here. You can buy a basic one at a hardware store. Touch it to the subfloor and the baseboard. If the reading stays above 15 percent, keep the dehumidifier and air mover running. Do not put the room back together until those numbers drop.

When to Stop DIY and Call a Professional

The line between doable and dangerous gets crossed when water has been sitting for more than 24 hours. At that point, mold spores start germinating. Mold remediation is not something you want to attempt with bleach and a sponge. Surface mold might clean off with a bleach solution, but mold that has grown inside a wall cavity or under a floor requires professional water extraction and often removal of affected materials. That is when you call a restoration company like Gateway Water & Mold.

Another clear sign is when the water has touched electrical outlets, furnace equipment, or HVAC ductwork. Water and electricity do not mix. If you are standing in water and there is any chance the power is live, stop. Call an electrician first, then a restoration company. Do not risk your life to save a rug.

Large-scale flooding from a storm or a burst main is also a job for pros. A sump pump can move hundreds of gallons per minute, but you still need to dry out the structure thoroughly. Professional crews bring air scrubbers and industrial dehumidifiers that pull moisture out of wood, drywall, and concrete. They also have moisture meters that measure deep into materials, not just the surface. Without that equipment, you might think the area is dry when the subfloor is still soaked. That hidden moisture leads to rot and mold, and it often voids your insurance claim because you did not take reasonable steps to prevent further damage.

The Role of Leak Detection

If you have had one leak, you want to make sure it does not happen again. Leak detection tools, like water sensors that sit near water heaters and washing machines, can alert you to a drip before it becomes a flood. Some systems shut off the water automatically. That is a cheap investment compared to the cost of professional restoration. After you remove water yourself after a leak, install a couple of those sensors. They pay for themselves the first time they catch a slow leak you would have missed.

Protecting Your Floors and Baseboards

Floor drying is not just about the surface. Water wicks up into baseboard drying areas and into the wall board. If you pull water out quickly and then keep air moving, you can often save the baseboards and subfloor. But if the water sat for more than a day, the baseboards might need to be removed so the wall cavity can dry. That is a job for professionals who know how to avoid damaging the wallboard further while still getting air into the gap.

For hardwood floors, time is even more critical. Wood starts to cup and buckle within hours of a leak. A wet/dry vacuum can remove surface water, but the wood will still swell. Professional water extraction involves pulling moisture out of the wood itself using heat and low-humidity air. Do not try to dry hardwood with a space heater. That can cause the wood to split or the finish to peel. Let a pro handle it if the wood is expensive or the area is large.

Insurance and Documentation

One practical tip I always share: take photos and videos before you start cleaning. Insurance companies want to see the extent of the damage before you begin removal. If you start vacuuming before you document, you might hurt your claim. After you have documented everything, then go ahead and remove water yourself after a leak if it is safe and manageable. Keep receipts for rented equipment, deodorizer you bought, and any materials you used. Those costs are often reimbursable under your policy.

Professional restoration companies also work directly with insurance adjusters. They can provide detailed reports and moisture meter readings that back up your claim. That alone can be worth the cost of hiring them, especially when the claim is large.

Final Thoughts

No one wants to call a water damage company at 2 a.m. But sometimes that is the smartest thing you can do. The line between DIY and calling a pro comes down to safety, speed, and the scale of water. For small, clean spills you caught early, a shop vac, dehumidifier, and air mover are all you need. For anything bigger, dirtier, or older than a day, hand the job to a professional. They have the sump pumps, air movers, moisture meters, and experience to dry your home properly and prevent mold from taking hold.

Remember: water that looks gone can still be hiding inside walls and under floors. That hidden moisture is what causes the real damage. So when in doubt, call someone who does this every day. Your home and your lungs will thank you.