

Why Sump Pumps Fail: Expert Advice from Gateway Water & Mold

If you have a basement in the St. Louis area, you probably know the sound of a sump pump kicking on after a heavy rain. It is a reassuring noise, a sign that water is being moved away from your foundation. But what happens when that sound stops? A failed sump pump can lead to serious water damage in a matter of hours, especially during our spring storms. I have worked on dozens of homes where a simple pump failure turned a damp floor into a costly mess. The most common reason a sump pump fails is not a manufacturing defect or old age. It is something far more mundane and preventable.

I recently watched a short video from Gateway Water & Mold, a local company that handles water damage and mold remediation 24/7. They answered the question directly: the most common reason a sump pump fails is a stuck float switch. That simple insight matches everything I have seen in the field. The float switch is the part of the pump that tells it when to turn on and off. When it gets stuck, the pump either runs nonstop or never starts at all. And in a basement, a pump that never starts is a disaster waiting to happen. [Gateway Water & Mold](#)

How a Float Switch Gets Stuck

The float switch on a sump pump is usually a plastic or foam ball attached to a short arm. As the water level rises, the float rises with it, tilting the switch and activating the pump. Over time, debris in the sump pit can interfere with that movement. Things like gravel, small toys, or even a buildup of sludge from the surrounding soil can wedge under the float and lock it in place. I have pulled out a child's action figure, a broken chunk of concrete, and once a dead mouse that had somehow fallen into the pit. Any of these can stop the float from moving.

Another common culprit is a check valve that fails. The check valve is supposed to keep water from flowing back down the discharge line after the pump shuts off. If it fails, water returns to the pit, and the pump cycles on and off repeatedly. That rapid cycling can wear out the float switch or cause it to hang up on the side of the pit. Over time, the constant motion can also fatigue the wires inside the switch, leading to an intermittent failure that is hard to diagnose.

Power Outages and Battery Backup

Power outages are another leading cause of sump pump failure, especially during severe weather. A storm that knocks out your electricity also fills your sump pit with runoff. Without power, the pump simply cannot run. This is where a battery backup system becomes critical. A good battery backup can keep your pump running for hours, even through a long outage. I

recommend to every homeowner in St. Louis that they invest in a battery backup for their sump pump. It is a small price compared to the cost of basement flooding and mold remediation.

Some pumps come with a built-in battery backup, but many do not. If you have an older pump, you can add a separate battery backup unit that connects to the pump and charges from the house current. When the power goes out, the battery takes over automatically. It is not a perfect solution, but it buys you time. And in a heavy rain, a few hours can make all the difference.

Other Common Failure Points

Beyond the float switch and power loss, sump pumps fail for a few other reasons. The discharge line can freeze or become blocked. In St. Louis winters, a discharge line that runs through an unheated crawl space can freeze solid. When the pump tries to push water against a frozen line, it can burn out the motor. A clogged discharge line from debris or a collapsed pipe will do the same thing.

Pumps themselves wear out. A submersible pump from a reliable brand like Grundfos, Zoeller, or Liberty Pumps can last ten years or more with proper care. But a pedestal pump, which has the motor above the water level, is more exposed to debris and humidity. The motor on a pedestal pump can fail sooner if the pit is not kept clean. I have seen both types fail, but the pedestal pump tends to have more issues with the mechanical switch.

Another issue is the pump's size relative to the water load. A pump that is too small for the volume of water coming in will run constantly and overheat. A pump that is too large can short-cycle, turning on and off rapidly, which wears out the switch and motor. The right pump for your home depends on the depth of the basement, the size of the sump pit, and the typical rainfall in your area. A professional assessment is worth the time.

What to Do After a Failure

If your sump pump fails and you end up with standing water in the basement, act quickly. Water damage sets in fast, and mold can start growing within 24 to 48 hours. The first step is to remove the water and dry everything out. A wet/dry vacuum or a temporary rental pump can get the bulk of the water out. Then run fans and a dehumidifier to dry the air. If the water was contaminated with sewage or floodwater, you need professional help.

That is where a company like Gateway Water & Mold comes in. They specialize in water damage restoration and mold remediation. They can assess the extent of the damage, dry the structure properly, and treat any mold growth. They also understand the local conditions in St. Louis, from the clay soil that can clog a sump pit to the old sewer lines that can cause a sewer

backup. A sewer backup is a different kind of disaster, often requiring a sewage ejector pump to handle the waste. But the principle is the same: when the pump fails, the mess follows.

Preventive Maintenance Tips

Preventing sump pump failure is mostly about simple maintenance. Here are a few things I do every year for my own pump:

- Clean the sump pit. Remove any debris, gravel, or sludge that could interfere with the float switch.
- Test the pump by pouring a bucket of water into the pit. Watch the float move and listen for the pump to turn on and off.
- Check the discharge line for leaks, blockages, or signs of freezing. Make sure the water is exiting at least ten feet from the foundation.
- Inspect the check valve. If it rattles or fails to hold water, replace it.
- Consider a backup pump or a battery backup. A second pump at a higher level can take over if the first fails.

I also recommend keeping a spare pump on hand if you can afford it. A cheap submersible pump from a hardware store can be a lifesaver in a pinch. It does not have to be a top-tier model like a Grundfos or Zoeller, just something that can move water while you wait for a professional repair.

The Bigger Picture: Mold and Health

A sump pump failure is not just about wet floors. Standing water in a basement creates the perfect environment for mold. Mold spores are everywhere, but they need moisture to grow. A damp basement with a failed pump can become a mold factory in days. Mold remediation is expensive and disruptive. It often involves removing drywall, carpet, and insulation. The health effects can be serious, especially for people with allergies or asthma.

That is why I always tell homeowners to treat their sump pump like a critical appliance. Test it regularly, keep the pit clean, and have a plan for power outages. The small investment in maintenance can save thousands in water damage and mold remediation later. And if disaster does strike, call a professional who can handle the cleanup and restoration safely.

Gateway Water & Mold offers that kind of service in the St. Louis area. They see the aftermath of failed sump pumps all the time. Their video on the most common cause of sump pump failure is a good reminder that the simplest part, the float switch, is often the weakest link. Keep it clean, keep it moving, and your pump will last longer than you expect.