So, you’ve decided to buy a house...
The BrightNest New Homeowner Guide

The **10** Must-Do’s When You Move Into a New House
Welcome Home.

Congratulations, you’re a homeowner! No more surprise rent-hikes from your landlord or weight restrictions on your pets. Right now, you’re probably knee-deep in boxes or expecting the cable guy any minute. Maybe you even jumped ahead and started working on the guest list for your housewarming party.

Before you go zooming into the stratosphere of homeowner glee, take a deep breath. There’s some new stuff to consider.

Owning a home is a big investment and a big responsibility. It’s important to identify key maintenance tasks and take care of important safety issues right away so you can prevent problems before they occur.

Why is prevention so important? Glad you asked:

1. **If You Spend A Little Now, You’ll Save A Lot Later.**
   A tube of caulk costs a few dollars at the hardware store. Replacing the walls around your bathtub because water damage occurred due to missing or deteriorated caulk could cost you up to $10,000. Learn how small maintenance expenses can save you big bucks in the long run.

2. **Just Because It “Works,” Doesn’t Mean it Works.**
   Some appliances, such as dryers, can operate normally but actually cost you extra money each time you use them. For example, dryer ducts clogged with lint use more energy and cost more to operate than those with clean ducts. But, you’d never spot the problem without inspecting your dryer and dryer ducts! Regular maintenance ensures everything that looks fine is also working fine.

3. **Things You Don’t See Can Hurt You.**
   Some things – like mold, radon or termites – can cause harm even though you can’t see them. For example, radon is a tasteless and odorless gas that can cause lung cancer, but you won’t know it’s in your house unless you test for it! Be mindful of these issues so that you can detect and eliminate them before they cause harm to people or property.

These things can be a little overwhelming, but don’t panic! We’ll start with basic issues that have big implications for your health and finances. If you want to become a home maintenance master, this is the first step.

Let’s do it!
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1. **Safety**

Your home is your haven. It’s a place to eat, sleep, relax and raise a family. However, your new house comes with some safety hazards, too. In fact, fires and burns are the third leading cause of deaths at home. Make your home as safe as possible by checking these four important things:

**a. Fire Extinguishers**

i. **How many do you need?** Fire experts recommend you keep at least one fire extinguisher in your kitchen and one in your garage (if you have one). Ideally, you should keep one on every level of your home so you can extinguish any fires as fast as possible. Extinguishers can be purchased for as little as $15, so there’s no excuse not to have them! For more information, read: [Purchase Fire Extinguishers](#).

ii. **Do they all work?** Once a year, take a look at your unused extinguisher. If the pressure gauge is green, you’re ready to roll in an emergency. If the gauge falls anywhere else, service or replace the extinguisher immediately. For more details, read: [Inspect Fire Extinguishers](#).

**b. Smoke & Carbon Monoxide Detectors**

i. **How many do you need?** Fire safety experts recommend you have a smoke detector on every floor of your home (including the attic and basement) and at the top of your stairs. Also, make sure every room with a fuel-burning appliance (e.g. furnace, boiler, water heater) has a smoke detector nearby. Finally, we recommend you put a detector inside each bedroom (or directly outside). For more information, read: [Purchase Smoke and CO Detectors](#).

ii. **Where should they go?** When you mount the alarm, remember that smoke rises. Place the alarm on the ceiling or as high as possible on the wall. For carbon monoxide detectors, keep them away from windows because fresh air may throw off the sensor.

iii. **How do I test them?** Once you have your detectors, it’s important to make sure they work. Find the “test” or “reset” button on your smoke and carbon monoxide detectors. If you are having trouble finding it, refer to the manufacturer’s instructions. Press the button (you may need a paper clip). If it goes off, your detector is working. The test usually runs about 30 seconds. If your detector does not work, try putting in new batteries and repeat. Note: If it’s hooked up to your security system, make sure that system is functioning properly as well.

**c. Security**

You never know how generous the previous homeowner was with their house keys. To be safe, re-key all locks and change your garage door code. Also check to make sure all windows and slider doors lock properly. For added protection, you may want to consider installing a security system as well.

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**Most fire extinguishers last for 5 to 15 years.** If your fire extinguisher passes the pressure gauge test, but is past the expiration date, you still need to replace it!

**The Kitchen Conundrum**

Putting a smoke detector in your kitchen is asking for a false alarm every time you burn the toast. One detector in a central location on the same floor as your kitchen will avoid this problem.

**Hate changing batteries?** Long-lasting smoke alarm batteries are available for about $8, and last for about 10 years (which is the average shelf life of most smoke detectors). Buy one of these to save yourself the effort of changing the battery!

**Smoke detectors are crucial!** About 62% of home-related fire deaths occur because the home did not have working smoke alarms.

When you’re all set, tell your insurance company. Some insurers offer a 5% discount for homes with smoke alarms!
d. Ground Fault Circuit Interrupters

i. What are GFCI Outlets? These outlets may come with a big name, but they’re actually small and simple. A GFCI (ground fault circuit interrupter) will immediately stop the flow of electricity if it senses the slightest change in the current, which prevents electrocution. Make sure GFCI outlets are installed near sinks — both bathroom and kitchen — in the laundry room and garage, and on exterior outlets.

ii. How do you test them? Testing a GFCI is easy. All you need is a small electrical device like a nightlight or hair dryer. Plug the device into the GFCI outlet and make sure it turns on. Push the “test” button on the GFCI and the device should turn off immediately (push the “reset” button on the GFCI to turn the device back on). If the device doesn’t turn off when you push the “test” button, call an electrician or replace the GFCI yourself as soon as possible. For more information, read: Test Your Ground Fault Interrupter Outlets.

2. Hazards: Protect People

People are a big part of any home (that’s not abandoned), so keep them safe! Your new house may look spic and span, but a number of substances that are toxic to humans may be present without you knowing it. Take the time to check for these usual suspects as soon as possible.

a. Radon

i. Why is radon an issue? Radon comes from the natural decay of uranium, which is found in most soils. It usually enters houses through cracks or holes in the foundation. Radon itself is actually a harmless gas, but as it decays it releases radioactive particles that are absorbed into your lungs and can cause lung cancer.

ii. How do you test for radon? There are several low-cost DIY radon test kits you can purchase in home improvement stores or online (starting at about $10). Follow the directions that come with the radon test kit so that the results are accurate! For more information, read: Test for Radon.

iii. What do you do if you have high radon levels? If your radon test result is 4pCi/L or higher, you should invest in a radon reduction system. To do this, it’s best to hire a radon-reduction contractor who will install an ideal system that meets state regulations.

iv. How do you check your radon reduction system? Look at the warning device on your system to make sure it’s working correctly. Also, check the fan and make sure that it’s working. Fans won’t last forever and will need to be repaired or replaced after 5-10 years. Inspect the outside exhaust vents from your system to make sure that leaves and other debris are not clogging the pipe. For more information, read: Check Your Radon Reduction System.
b. Mold

i. Why is mold an issue? Mold isn't just a problem found in old, rotting homes. Modern homes are tightly sealed to increase energy efficiency, which means water gets trapped inside. Mold loves nothing more than to grow in warm, wet spaces. There are about 50 species of mold that are toxic to humans and lead to respiratory problems and fungal infections. Bottom line: If you have mold, you want to know about it, and get rid of it!

ii. How do you detect mold? Mold can be difficult to find because it often grows in areas you can't see, like inside your walls. Do a quick check for mold in spaces that may have consistent contact with water (under the sink, around the bathtub, in the basement). Also, be mindful of any increased sneezing, coughing or allergic reactions you or your family may start experiencing after moving into your house.

iii. How do you remove mold? If you find (or suspect the presence of) mold, it's best to contact a mold removal company that will test the extent of the problem and ensure everything is removed.

iv. How can you prevent mold in the bathroom? A warm, damp bathroom wall is a breeding ground for mold and mildew. Do a bathroom caulk inspection to make sure you're all sealed up. For step-by-step instructions, read: Bathroom Caulk Inspection. It's also a good idea to use your bath fan after each shower to remove damp air from the bathroom. If you don't have a bath fan, be sure to crack a window or leave the shower door open so moisture can escape.

c. Asbestos

i. Why is asbestos a problem? Asbestos is a mineral fiber that was used in various construction materials up until the late 1970s. When materials made with asbestos are disrupted, the fibers are released and can be inhaled by humans, which can cause lung cancer.

ii. What to do if you think asbestos is in your home? The best thing you can do is leave the material alone, but inspect it regularly (from a distance). Remember, undamaged material does not pose a health risk. If you do see tears, cuts, water damage or other signs of wear, contact a professional contractor to repair or remove the material.

d. Lead Paint

i. Why is lead paint a problem? Lead-based paint is toxic if ingested, especially for kids. It has been linked to nervous system damage in children, behavioral problems, learning disabilities and slow growth. If your home was built after 1978, you're most likely safe. However, older homes need a check.

ii. How do I check for lead paint problems? Lead-based paint is usually not a hazard if it is in good condition and isn't on an impact or friction surface like a window or door jamb. Pay special attention to surfaces that children can chew on or that get a lot of wear-and-tear, such as windows and window sills, doors and door frames, stairs, railings, banisters, and porches.
iii. What do you do if you think there's a problem? The best and most permanent solution is to hire a certified expert to remove the lead-based paint completely. To address the issue immediately, you can paint over the problem with a paint that is not lead-based. Also keep an eye on the kids and make sure they aren't picking at the walls or eating paint chips (it happens).

3. Hazards: Protect Property

Now that the people living in your house are protected, it's time to give some TLC to your property itself. Unprotected property is much more likely to get damaged or destroyed, which gets expensive very quickly. For example, a flooded basement can cost you anywhere from $1,500 – $10,000, and sometimes even more! Follow these steps to help prevent property damage in your home.

a. Washer Hoses
   i. What do you look for? Check the hoses that came with your washing machine. If they are rubber, it's a good idea to replace them with steel braided hoses. These cost $5-$10 more than rubber, but last a lot longer and won't split open. This simple, inexpensive task will help you reduce the likelihood of a water catastrophe.

b. Sump Pumps
   i. What does a sump pump do? Sump pumps remove the water that accumulates around and under basements and crawlspace by pumping it outside. This is important because if the water is not removed, pressure builds around the foundation of your house and can cause a basement flood and/or leaky foundation walls.
   ii. Where is your sump pump? If your new house has a basement, or any below-ground floor, you should have a sump pump. To find it, first locate your sump pit (usually in your basement or in a crawlspace). Sump pits will have a sump pump in them. The sump pump is connected to pipes that take the pumped water outside and away from the house.
   iii. How do you make sure it’s working? The sump pump will have two plugs: One that is connected to the pump itself, and one that is connected to the “float” that tells the pump when the water in the sump pit is too high and needs to be pumped out. To test the pump, take the plug from the back of the float, unplug it, and then insert it directly into the wall outlet. When you plug it into the outlet, you should hear it turn on immediately. For more detailed instructions, read: Inspect Your Sump Pump and Backup Sump Pump.
   iv. What do you do if it doesn't turn on? If your pump doesn't turn on, then you should call a plumber ASAP to get your system checked. It's well worth the expense.
c. Basement Walls

i. What do you look for? Before you start filling your basement with odds and ends, take a few minutes to check for any cracks or signs of water leakage on the walls and floor.

ii. What do you do if you find a crack? If you find a small crack, make a point to check it every few months to make sure it isn’t expanding. If you see water leakage or a major crack, contact an expert to get it fixed. Basement repairs are not a DIY project!

iii. What if your basement is finished? If your basement is finished, it will be harder to detect cracks and leaking. After it rains, check for wet spots in the carpet, especially in the corners of your basement. Also give your walls a sniff periodically. If you detect a musty smell, you may have mold or mildew behind your walls. If you suspect a larger problem, call a professional to inspect further.

d. Pests

i. Why are pests a problem? Some pests, like termites or rodents, can cause a ton of damage to your home without you even knowing they’re around. Checking a few of their common hideouts will prevent them from causing serious damage.

ii. How do you check for termites? First, check for swarming. Swarms are the most visible indicator that there’s a termite problem, especially during the spring. Next, check your foundation walls for shelter tubes. Termites build pencil-thick tunnels of mud to travel from their underground colonies to your shelter. Look around your foundation walls for tubes. If you find one, break it off. If it’s rebuilt, termites are active in those tubes. For more termite inspection details, read: Check For Termites.

iii. How do you check for rodents? Your attic is prime real estate for a rodent infestation. Head up and take a look around. Look for evidence of a problem, such as gnawed wires, shredded paper nests, and live animals. If you see any evidence of an infestation, we recommend you call an exterminator to help you figure out how they’re getting in, how to get rid of them and evaluate potential damage that they’ve caused. For more information about a general attic inspection, read: Inspect Your Attic.

e. Foundation Exterior

i. What do you look for? Do a loop around your property with your eyes on the foundation. Look for any place where water might accumulate near the foundation and eventually leak into your house. Pay particular attention to your downspouts. The best time to do this is while it’s raining or directly afterwards, so you can see the problem areas in action.

ii. What do you do if water is accumulating near your foundation? If your downspouts are dumping water less than five feet away from your house, redirect the water with gutter extensions. Gutter extensions can be found at your local hardware store for $10-$50, depending on their length. For more details, read: Maintain Your Downspouts.
There are a number of critical systems in your home (such as the main electrical panel and water meter) that are important to understand. Make sure everyone in your family is aware of what these systems do and—if appropriate—know how to turn them on and off.

**a. Electrical Panel (Fuse Box)**

i. **Always Use Caution.** If you have never been taught how to turn power to an electrical panel on/off, or never reset a circuit breaker or fuse, call a professional or an experienced friend to help. Electricity can be deadly. This is not a safe task to teach children!

ii. **When do you need to deal with the electrical panel?** This system protects your electrical circuits by cutting off the power if the current becomes too high (commonly known as a “blown fuse”). The most common reason to interact with your electrical panel is because you blew a fuse or need to turn off all power to your home.

iii. **Where is the electrical panel located?** You will usually find the electrical panel in the basement or a utility room. If you have children, make sure they know to stay away from this area.

iv. **What goes where?** It’s a good idea to figure out which outlet each circuit connects with. Usually, it’s possible to get a map of the panel from the previous owner or original builder.

v. **How do you use the main disconnect?** This breaker or fuse is usually marked “main” and located near the top of the box. Turning it off shuts off all power to the house.

vi. **How do you reset a breaker or fuse?** It’s important to learn how to reset a breaker or replace a fuse (a fuse is found on older panels). Each system is different, so consult your owner’s manual for specific instructions.

vii. **What if you keep blowing fuses?** If a circuit breaker keeps “tripping” or a fuse keeps “blowing” then something is wrong with your electrical system and you should call an electrician as soon as possible.

**b. Water – Water Meter (unless you have a well)**

i. **Where is your water meter?** You can usually find the water meter wherever water service enters your house. This could be outside, in the basement or a utility room (if you live in an area that sees cold winters, the water meter will almost always be located in a heated part of the home and will never be outside).

ii. **Where are the shut-off valves?** Usually there are shut-off valves on either side of the water meter. To turn your water off, either turn the valve so that it’s perpendicular to the pipe (which is the “off” position) or turn it clockwise until it won’t turn anymore.
iii. **When do I need to use the main shut-off valves?** This valve will shut off the water to your entire house. This is necessary if you are doing major plumbing work, such as a frozen pipe repair, or you are leaving your house for an extended period of time (this is most common in vacation homes). For plumbing fixes to specific fixtures (such as the sink or toilet) there will be a local shutoff valve you can use. To learn more about toilet problems, read: Fix a Running Toilet.

iv. **Are your local valves in good shape?** Take a look at each local shut off valve for your sinks and toilets. Make sure you can turn them on and off easily. If they are extremely rusty, wet to the touch, or won’t turn off, they should be replaced.

c. **Gas - Gas Meter**

i. **Where is my gas meter?** Your gas meter should be located outside, on the front or side of the building. In some cases, it may be inside a cabinet enclosure attached to the outside of the building.

ii. **Why is this important?** It’s critical to know where your gas meter is located and how to turn it off so that you can quickly shut off your house’s gas supply in the event of a gas leak.

iii. **How do you use the shut-off valve?** Most houses have two shut-off valves: One is located outside the house on the gas pipe leading into your home and one is located inside the home where the pipe enters the house. To completely shut off the gas service to your house, turn the valve so that it is perpendicular to the pipe.

5. **Basic/Ongoing Maintenance**

So far, we’ve covered most of the high impact issues around your home. Pat yourself on the back, you’re making excellent progress! Now, it’s time to cover some smaller issues that require a basic check or consistent maintenance. This is not intended to be a comprehensive maintenance list! We just want to highlight the routine maintenance tasks that can have the biggest impact on your health, safety and wallet.

a. **Furnace/AC Service and Filter**

i. **Why is furnace and filter maintenance important?** You may not know this, but all the air in your house passes through your furnace filter (even cold air). Plus, new HVAC equipment is EXPENSIVE. A new furnace will generally run you $3,000-$5000! Preserve this pricey piece of equipment by taking care of it properly.

ii. **Is your filter clean?** Make sure you change your furnace filter regularly to keep the air in your house clean and your furnace running properly. Different filters need changing at different times, but most types take between 2-30 minutes to switch. Not sure what kind of filter you have? When you sign up for BrightNest, we’ll walk you through the process and send you reminders when it’s time for a change.

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**According to the EPA, indoor air is generally found to be 2-5 times more polluted than outdoor air due to the presence of chemicals found in many household cleaners & air fresheners. A clean furnace filter will help reduce pollution levels in your house!**

Next time you need to replace a filter, buy in bulk. That way, the next time it needs to be changed, you’ll have no excuse to ignore it.
iii. Is your HVAC unit being serviced regularly? Just like people, your furnace and air conditioner require regular checkups. Give a local HVAC technician a call and schedule a basic HVAC maintenance check-up. Catching HVAC problems early will save you from needing a costly replacement.

b. Inspect and Clean Out Your Dryer Duct

i. Why are your dryer ducts important? A clean dryer system lasts longer and costs less money to run. Plus, by cleaning your ducts regularly you will prevent mold buildup and reduce the risk of a lint fire.

ii. How do you keep your dryer duct clean? Carefully pull the dryer away from the wall and remove the duct that connects your dryer to the duct in your wall. Vacuum out the back of the dryer, the dryer duct, and the wall duct as much as possible. Be careful when reattaching the duct and pushing the dryer back into place – make sure that the duct does not detach from the wall or dryer, and that it doesn’t kink or crush. Also inspect the vent on the outside of the house to make sure it isn’t clogged with lint. If it is, carefully remove the vent cover and vacuum it out thoroughly.

Clean your dryer duct at least once a year. If you’re a laundry fiend (4+ loads a day), clean it every six months!

Remember to clean the lint screen before or after drying each load of laundry.

Most dryer-related fires occur because lint builds up in the dryer or the exhaust duct.

c. Wood-burning Fireplace Safety

i. Do I need to have my chimney inspected? Yes, it’s a good idea to have your chimney professionally inspected when you move into your new home to ensure it’s safe to use your fireplace. Hire a professional who is certified by the Chimney Safety Institute of America and the National Fireplace Institute to perform this inspection. He or she will make sure your chimney is clean, that there are no animals or debris blocking the passage and that the flue is in good condition.

ii. How often do I need to have my chimney cleaned? Ideally, your chimney should be inspected professionally once a year, and cleaned if necessary. While it’s easy to inspect your fireplace, without special tools it’s almost impossible to adequately inspect your chimney. Leave this one to the professionals!

d. Septic Tank Maintenance

i. Why is septic tank maintenance important? Even if you’re not having problems with your septic tank, it’s important to have it pumped to remove any scum and sludge, and give the leaching portion of your system a break from receiving liquid.

ii. How do you maintain your septic tank? Hire a licensed and bonded septic-pumping contractor to test the tank and have the sludge pumped out when the scum and sludge layers equal 1/3 the total capacity of your septic tank. If it builds up higher than that, it will reduce the capacity of the tank and eventually, the sludge will leak into the drain field. The only things you should ever flush are water, septic system safe toilet paper and human waste. Never flush the following: coffee grinds, dental floss, diapers, kitty litter, sanitary napkins or tampons, cigarette butts, condoms, fat, grease, or paper towels. For a complete guide to maintaining your septic tank, read: Maintain Your Septic Tank.
e. Seasonal Maintenance
Most of the ongoing maintenance tasks we’ve mentioned can be done at any
time of year, as long as they’re done consistently. However, there are a few
issues that are season specific. Two big ones are gutters and sprinklers. Gutters
should be cleaned twice a year: Once in mid to late fall (when most of the leaves
have already fallen) and again in early spring (to clear any debris that may have
accumulated during winter). For details, read: Gutter Cleaning. If you have sprin-
klers, you’ll likely turn your system off for winter and reactivate it during spring.
To learn how to do this, read: Start Up & Inspect Your Sprinkler System. You can
find more seasonal maintenance tips and reminders on BrightNest.

6. Basic Tools for the Home
Now that you have some to-do’s on your list, it’s a good idea to grab a few tools as
well. These are seven tools that you’ll use often while maintaining your home. These
may not be the only tools you need, but they are definitely a solid start!

a. Safety Glasses
Always protect your eyes! You can find safety glasses for less than $5.

b. Tape Measure
A decent tape measure is a necessity for most household projects and main-
tenance.

c. Hammer
Professionals recommend you choose a hammer with a straight claw instead
of a curved claw, because they’re more effective for common jobs (like
pulling nails).

d. Screwdrivers
To us, this is one tool where your best option is to buy a mixed set. Be sure
your set includes 1/4 and 3/8-inch flat heads and No. 1 and No. 2 Phillips head
drivers.

e. Crescent Wrench
The crescent wrench is your best wrench-option because it’s adjustable, so
you can use it with an array of nuts and bolts.

f. Cordless Drill and Bits
Make sure your drill has multiple speeds and is reversible. Yes, you want a drill
with a lot of power (meaning high voltage), but increased voltage means
increased weight, so buy something that isn’t too heavy.

g. Toolbox
Lastly, you’ll need something to put those new tools in! This is just as impor-
tant as the screwdrivers and hammer, because tools are useless if you can’t
find them! Storing your tools in a toolbox will also help protect them and
prevent rust.
7. Owner’s Manuals

Did you inherit an unidentified pile of papers from the previous owner of your house? No idea where the manual is for your fridge? We can fix that. BrightNest has a feature called the HomeFolio that allows you to store home-related information such as paint colors, contractor phone numbers, and manuals all in one spot! Plus, you can enter the brand and model for your appliances and we will find and store your owner’s manual for you. Sign up for BrightNest to check it out. It’s completely free. Here is a quick list of items worth tracking down a manual for:

- **Kitchen appliances**
  - Fridge
  - Oven
  - Stove
  - Dishwasher
  - Vent Hood

- **Heating and air conditioning equipment**
  - Furnace
  - Air conditioner
  - Humidifier
  - Thermostat
  - Boiler

- **Water heater(s)**

- **Garage door opener**

8. Emergency Preparation

You’ve taken a lot of important steps to prevent accidents and injuries around your house, but it’s important to always be prepared for emergencies. Follow these steps so that you’re ready should something unexpected happen.

a. Create an Emergency Escape Plan

i. **Where are the exits to your house?** Teach all family members how to exit the home from different locations. This is important in situations such as a fire, where some exits may be blocked.

ii. **Are your kids prepared and informed?** Teach children to exit the house immediately in case of an emergency. Otherwise, they may be tempted to go back for pets or possessions.

iii. **Where will you meet?** Sometimes, not everyone can exit the house from the same spot, so establish a specific meeting place outside and away from the house so that you can quickly account for all members of your family.
iv. **Is the second floor a viable escape route?** If second floor windows could be a possible escape route, teach everyone how to open the window and have a rope ladder available nearby.

v. **Do you have flashlights?** Place flashlights in several areas around the home and make sure that everyone knows where to find them.

**b. Ensure Your Address is Visible**

i. **Why is this important?** In an emergency, you want ambulance or fire crews to find your house as soon as possible. They can't do this if they can't see your address!

ii. **How can you increase address visibility?** Use large numbers (3 or 4 inches high) near your front door that can be read from a distance. Make sure the color of the number stands out from the side of your house. If you have a porch light, place your numbers where they will be well illuminated. It's also a good idea to place large, reflective numbers on both sides of your mailbox.

**c. First Aid Kit**

i. **Where should your first aid kit be located?** Place a first aid kit in a central location of your new home. The kitchen is an ideal spot since injuries like burns and cuts are most likely to occur in this room. Make sure that everyone in your family knows where the kit is and what tools are inside.

ii. **What should the first aid kit be used for?** Your first aid kit should be used for treating minor injuries such as burns, cuts, stings, splinters and sprains. For more serious injuries, always call emergency services.

**d. Pets**

i. **Where will you take your pet in an emergency?** Plan ahead and find a hotel or shelter that allows pets. That way, you won’t have to scramble!

ii. **Is there someone to care for your pet if you’re unavailable?** Arrange ahead of time for a specific neighbor or friend to come get your pet if there is an emergency and you cannot get home yourself. It’s important that this person has prior interaction with your pet, and knows how to take care of them (feeding, medical needs, etc.).

iii. **Do you have a pet alert decal?** These stickers are available online, and should be displayed in a highly visible spot such as a front window. This will let emergency services know there is an animal in the house that needs help!

**9. Safety Tips for Kids and Pets**

If you’ve been an apartment dweller until now, your house has likely come with some key additions like a yard, garage and maybe even a pool (we’re jealous). These things are fun, but they also pose risks to children and pets if they aren’t protected. Run through this checklist when you move in to help keep your kids and pets safe at home.
a. Kids

i. Is your garage door safe? To keep your garage door from closing on your child, check the electrical eye at the bottom of the garage door. Place a baby-sized object in the line of the red eye, and push the garage door button. If working properly, the eye should sense the object and the garage door should not move more than an inch. For more information on garage safety, read: Inspect and Maintain Your Garage Door.

ii. Are your stairs safe? Use the tennis ball test to make sure that your stairs are safe for little ones. If a tennis ball can fit between the balusters (also called spindles and stair sticks), then it doesn’t meet building codes. Next, give your stair railing a good pull to ensure it’s not loose. If either your railing is loose or a tennis ball easily passes through the balusters, consult a qualified carpenter or handyman to repair your stairs.

iii. Are your outlets safe? Electrical cover plates keep little fingers from touching wires that could seriously injure them. Check to make sure that you don’t have any open electrical boxes and that all of your cover plates are screwed tightly against the wall.

iv. Is your kitchen safe? Between knives, heat, and heavy objects, the kitchen is a danger zone for children. To learn how to fully protect your kids, read: Kid Proof Your Kitchen.

b. Pets

i. How do you ensure your pet is safe in your home? A lot of the precautions you take for children will help your furry friend(s) out as well. However, there are a few extra steps to take for pet-owners.

iii. Is your house safe for pets? As you install electronics in the house, make an effort to keep loose wires organized and out of reach. A nest of wires is easy to mistake for a chew toy. Also do a quick check of all small spaces that your vacuum cleaner might not reach (like underneath the sofa) but your pet can to make sure there aren’t any hazardous items around. Lastly, make sure that any plants you own aren’t harmful to your pet if ingested.

iii. Is your yard safe for pets? There’s a good chance your pet will spend some quality time in the backyard, and there are a number of safety factors to consider, such as the type of fertilizer you use and potentially poisonous flowers. For details, read: Pet-Proof Your Yard.

iv. Are your cleaning products safe for pets? Since you’ll be spreading cleaning products all over your house, and your pets won’t know to stay away from them, it’s a good idea to use cleaners they can snack on a little bit. To learn how to create pet-friendly floor cleaner, read: Make Pet-Friendly Floor Cleaner. To create an entire arsenal of non-toxic household cleaners, read: Make Eco-Friendly Cleaning Products.
10. **Start a House Fund**

No matter how cost-effective you are, properly maintaining your house requires some spending. Don’t freak out when you start seeing these expenses, just plan ahead! Earmark about 1% to 3% of your house’s initial price every year for home maintenance expenses. If you don’t spend it all, roll it over to next year. That way, you’ll steadily build a fund you can dip into as much as necessary.

Think of it as a rainy day fund, except you may literally need it on a rainy day if your roof starts leaking! Not sold yet?

Read: The Value of Home Maintenance.

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**Now, Who’s Ready to Decorate?**

**Congratulations**, you’ve taken some great first steps as a homeowner. There’s still a lot to do, but this is a solid start. As you set out upon the home maintenance waters, remember to be patient and cautious at all times. There are no extra points for cutting corners or speeding through tasks.

Want some extra help staying on track and coming up with new home maintenance ideas? Create a [free BrightNest account](#) and we’ll send customized tips, tricks and expert advice directly to your inbox each week. It’s an easy way to save money, be healthy and keep your home in great shape year round!

**Welcome Home!**