

# Checklist for Leaving Your Home Vacant

[By Chuck Evans - Your Houston Home Inspector](#)

Disclaimer: This list is being prepared as a convenience for our home inspection client's use. We do not assume or accept any liability for the use of this checklist. We suggest that anyone who will be leaving their home vacant for an extended period of time contact the manufacturers of their major systems and appliances for specific instructions for preparation and startup of those systems.

## Before you leave

Decide whether to turn off the main water supply or not. If you want to turn off the main water valve, make sure that your irrigation system is connected to the main before the valve or your sprinkler system won't run. A water leak can cause major damage to a vacant home, so protection from water damage is a major consideration when leaving the home. If you plan to turn the main water service off, water utilizing fixtures and appliances cannot be operated while you are away. If you leave the water main on, these items can be operated, but there is some increased risk of leaks. We will assume that all valves, fixtures and appliances are in a good state of repair and have been well maintained.

- If you decide to turn the main water service off:
  - Turn off the gas or electrical supply to the water heater before turning off the main service valve (you may also wish to drain the unit after you have turned off the main service valve).
- If you decide to leave the main water service on:
  - Turn off the gas or electrical supply to the water heater or set it to the vacation setting. (note: Hydrogen sulfide can accumulate in a water storage tank due to the action of sulfur reducing bacteria in the water, which can cause a rotten egg smell in the water. This often occurs in vacant homes where the hot water is not being used regularly);
  - Turn off the valves to the washing machine (we strongly recommend replacing rubber factory hoses with braided stainless "no-burst" hoses, even if the house is not being left vacant). A burst washing machine hose can cause major flooding damage in a very short period of time;
  - Turn off the water supply valves to commodes and drain tanks or install a leak sensing type of fill valve (e.g., Leak Sentry by Fluidmaster). A leaky toilet flapper can waste a great deal of water and a broken tank (toilet tanks can and do sometimes crack spontaneously) can flood a house.
- Take care of any exterior weatherization (e.g., caulking and sealing) and water management tasks (e.g., drainage and gutter maintenance) from your home inspection report;
- Make sure that your HVAC system is in good condition and functioning properly. Pay particular attention to the primary and secondary condensation drains on the A/C unit to ensure that they are clear and properly sloped toward the drain. We strongly recommend installing a float switch to shut off the condensing unit if the secondary pan fills with water;
- Set the thermostat to a reduced setting, but do not turn the system off. In the winter, you will need to run heat (unless you fully winterize the home, which is not covered here) to prevent possible freeze damage. In the summer months, you will need to run the A/C to keep interior humidity to moderate levels. Also, extreme temperature variations can cause cracking in sheetrock;
- Arrange for someone to watch / monitor the house. Provide them with a resource / contact list including service companies for major systems (HVAC, electrical, plumbing, etc.), landscaping, trash pick-up, etc. Give their name and number to the alarm monitoring company and setup a passphrase for them;
- Arrange for ongoing lawn maintenance;
- Unplug unneeded appliances such as microwaves, TVs, DVRs, Stereos, computers, washer, dryer, etc. to eliminate "vampire loads" and reduce the potential for them to be damaged due to lightning strikes, power surges, etc.;
- Empty the refrigerators and freezers of any perishable items. Decide whether to leave the units on or to unplug them. If you unplug them be sure to prop the doors open. Put some odor absorbent material (e.g., baking soda or charcoal) inside the units in either case. If you keep the freezer plugged in, you can leave the icemaker on or turn it off (we prefer to leave them on rather than have them inactive for extended periods of time). Get rid of any excess food and clean out all waste containers to avoid attracting pests;
- Close the fireplace damper and doors;

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- Don't stash spare keys outside the house (everyone knows exactly where to look for them). If you do need to leave a key outside, use a lockbox that you keep hidden out of sight.

Periodic activities to be performed while you're away:

## Daily

- Check that the security system is functioning;
- Check that doors and windows are locked;
- Inspect for signs of vandalism and forced entry;
- Check doors, windows & screens to be sure they are secure;
- Clear unwanted flyers and newspapers from your yard/mail box;
- Ask a neighbor to set out your trash can with some trash on pickup days;
- Turn different lights on/off, reposition shades and curtains;
- Park a car in the driveway every once in a while;
- Check all inside and outside faucets;
- Walk the house and yard checking for any other issues.

## Weekly

- Run a light dishwasher cycle without soap (this will help keep the seals from drying out and leaking);
- Flush/check all toilets. If the water is on, flush them. Otherwise, check to ensure that there is adequate water in the bowl and add water to the bowl as necessary to maintain water level. Commodes have an integral trap that holds water. The water in this trap maintains a sanitary seal between the living area and the sewer system. The water can evaporate from this trap if the commode is not used regularly, which can allow sewer gas into the home;
- Run/check all faucets (this is important to refresh the water in the traps below sinks, showers, tubs, etc. for the same reason as commodes (if the water main is turned off, water should be brought in and a pint or more poured in each drain);
- Check for leaks under sinks and appliances;
- Run the kitchen food waste disposal after placing a couple handfuls of ice in the unit. Disposals frequently seize up with rust when they are not used regularly. Placing ice cubes in the grinding chamber effectively knocks excess rust off of the grinding plate and helps keep the impellers moving freely;
- Check refrigerator / freezer and empty the icemaker, if applicable;
- Check that the lawn & irrigation system is working properly and there are no broken heads / pipes.

## Monthly

- Inspect roof and gutters for damage and debris;
- Pour about a quart of water down the clothes washer drain standpipe in order to refresh the water in the trap and maintain the sanitary seal.