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Evaluating the Condition of Your Membrane or Built-Up Roof

Membrane or built-up roof covers are most frequently used on roofs that have a very low slope, usually less than about 2-inches of drop for every 12-inches of length. In homes, these low pitch roofs are usually covered with either a membrane that is glued to the roof sheathing or by layers of felt and tar with a gravel placed on top to protect the felt and tar. In most cases, when a membrane is used, it will be covered with a granular surface that looks similar to the surface of asphalt shingles. These granules help to protect the membrane from degradation caused by ultraviolet light from the sun. Low slope roofs are notorious for leaking because the water doesn't tend to run off as quickly so it has a greater opportunity to work its way through any cracks or splits in the roof cover. Cracks and splits develop over time as the roof cover expands and contracts at a different rate from the contraction and expansion of the deck.



Portion of membrane roof showing seam between membrane sections
(click image for larger version)



If you don't have a license to climb a ladder or your spouse or friends have told you that you have no business on a ladder, you can try binoculars or skip to [Get an Expert Opinion](#). There are reasons why roofers have extremely high workers compensation rates (see [Ladder Safety Tips](#)).

As you read through the information on roofs, some of the terms used may not be familiar to you. You can click on [Roofing Concepts and Terms](#) to access a list of definitions that may be helpful.

Inspect the roof surface: Print out and use the [Checklist for Membrane or Built-Up Roof Evaluation](#).

From the top of your roof: Look for cracks, holes, gaps, buckling of the roof cover, areas where water doesn't run off (ponding), and areas where most of the surface granules or gravel cover are missing. These signs of aging are indicators that your low-slope roof is likely to leak during a hurricane. Check around all pipes, vents or anywhere that something sticks up through the roof membrane. The flashing around these items should be sealed to sides of the item that sticks up through the roof, with no gaps or cracks. Check areas where the low-slope roof connects with any vertical walls or chimneys to make sure that the flashing in these areas is well sealed to the vertical wall. Check the edges of the roof to ensure that the membrane is well anchored around the edges and that any flashing is well attached to the fascia boards. Note if any of the flashing is rusted, torn or damaged. If a membrane roof cover is used, check all joints or seams between pieces of the membrane looking for any blistering, separations, buckling or areas where the layers are not sealed together. Make sure that drainage from the roof is not blocked, clean out any gutters that run along the edge of the low-slope roof.

From inside your attic: Chances are that there is little or no access to the air space under your low slope roof so there is usually little point in trying to peer up into this area.

Inside your house: Look for cracked paint, discolored gypsum board, and peeling wallpaper as signs of damaged roof areas. However, be aware that another cause of stains on a ceiling can come from air conditioning ducts that sweat, i.e. drops of water from condensation that forms on the ducts in a hot humid attic.

Get an Expert Opinion: If you are not able to make the inspection yourself, get a reputable roofer or home inspector to evaluate your roof. (Check with neighbors and friends for referrals and check with the Better Business Bureau).

[Checklist for Membrane or Built-Up Roof Evaluation](#)

[What can I do about my membrane or built-up roof?](#)

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