



Flaking, Peeling or Scaling on Your Basement Walls

Flaking, peeling or scaling basement walls

Are your basement walls flaking, peeling or scaling? Are large portions of the basement paint seeming to just crack and flake off? Are your bare walls looking “scaly” or as if the concrete is flaking? The following are the reasons you may be experiencing these issues here in Western Pennsylvania.

IMPORTANT – There is a difference between peeling or bubbling paint and flaking or peeling concrete. While both conditions have similar causes, they are different issues with differing levels of severity.

Basement paint flaking or peeling may look like the following:



Concrete spalling or failure may look like the following:



1. **Moisture** – Moisture on the walls behind the paint will cause the paint to lose adhesion to the concrete or block, causing it to chip, flake and fall off the wall. Here in Western Pennsylvania, our soils tend to hold moisture over a period of time. This means that heavy or frequent rains or snow melts can cause a condition called “[hydrostatic pressure](#)” which, over time, can cause serious foundation issues.

Untreated concrete and concrete block are quite porous, meaning it can and will readily absorb water that comes against it, especially if that water is present over prolonged periods of time. If there are cracks or other faults in your foundation, then water can freely enter through wall or the mortar. This moisture or water will force its way out of the wall inside creating pressure against the paint “membrane” on the interior wall, eventually causing the paint to fail in the form of chipping or actual peeling or flaking of in chunks or pieces.

In some instances, you may also see a white, powdery substance known as [“efflorescence”](#) pushing through the paint, or you may even see [mold](#). Both of these conditions are caused by the moisture trapped beneath the paint, and in some instances, we actually see the mold “consuming” the paint, since it may contain materials that mold likes to feed on.

If the issue isn’t peeling or flaking paint, but rather flaking or “chunking” concrete, the problem is more advanced than simple peeling paint. This condition is known as [“spalling”](#) and is actually a defect with the wall. Spalling occurs when the walls are moist or wet enough over a period of time that actual deterioration of the concrete or block begins to occur. Unchecked, this can cause major damage to a foundation, and can result in foundation failure.

2. High levels of humidity – High humidity levels in the basement can result in the growth of fungi, such as mold and mildew, encouraging basement paints to fail and flake or peel. Many basement sealers and paints also allow moisture to penetrate from the inside of basement to the basement walls, again triggering the mold or mildew growth described above.
3. Poor surface preparation or application – If the basement paint or sealer was applied to the walls without proper cleaning or preparation, it can be prone to peel or flake. Basement paints and sealers are intended to be applied to clean, dry walls and within certain temperature parameters. The presence of moisture, dust, particles or improper temperature conditions can cause the paint to fail.
4. Foundation settling or cracking – Every home will experience some level of “settling” or shifting over time, caused by soil conditions, moisture levels and a host of other issues. Foundation cracking often causes the paint on the walls to fail by allowing moisture to enter from the outside, and mold and other fungal spores or “seeds” to enter the basement and begin to grow, forcing the paint off the wall.

In most of the cases our experts see, moisture is the issue causing the problem. If the basement walls are moist or wet, and if hydrostatic pressure is present, painting or sealing the basement walls can be a futile experience. The only real solution is to stop the water from getting to the block or concrete in the first place.

Some homeowners believe that adding additional layers of basement paint will resolve the problem, but without eliminating the moisture, the problem will not resolve regardless of the number of layers of paint. In some instances, applying more paint may actually make the issue worse.