Is your basement ready for winter?

12 checks to do before the ground freezes, for homeowners in Algonquin, Crystal Lake, St. Charles, Geneva and Vernon Hills.

Walk it in an afternoon and tick each box. Pages 2 to 4 explain every check: why it matters, what to look for, what you can do yourself, and when to call a pro. Start outside: the normal first freeze is October 13 at Rockford and October 19 at O'Hare [3].

Outside, before the ground freezes

- ☐ 1 Gutters clear, downspouts carry water 5 feet out
- ☐ 2 Ground slopes away from the house
- ☐ 3 Outdoor faucets and hoses shut down

Inside: warning signs that get expensive if ignored

- ☐ 4 Foundation cracks marked and dated
- ☐ 5 No water signs on walls or floor
- ☐ 6 Pipes on outside walls protected
- ☐ 7 Furnace filter changed, checkup booked

Safety and legal basics

- ☐ 8 Smoke alarm on the basement level
- ☐ 9 CO alarm within 15 feet of every bedroom
- ☐ 10 Radon test done
- ☐ 11 A way out of every basement bedroom
- ☐ 12 Permit before any basement project

A leaking wall or crack, no escape window or an old furnace?

Tell us what you found: request an estimate online, scan the code, or call or text (847) 846-2332. We call or text back to set up a visit.

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1 Gutters clear, downspouts 5 feet out

Why it matters Rain and snowmelt that land beside the foundation soak the soil against the wall. Downspouts should end at least 5 feet out, and gutters should be clean as winter approaches [1].

Look for Overflow streaks on the siding, downspouts that end at the wall, loose extensions.

You can Clear the gutters once the leaves are down. Add or reattach downspout extensions.

Call a pro Gutters out of safe reach, sagging, leaking at the joints, or overflowing when clear.

2 Ground slopes away from the house

Why it matters Code asks for the ground to fall at least 6 inches in the first 10 feet from the house [2]. Settled soil by the wall lets water collect there and get into the basement [5].

Look for Soil or mulch dipping toward the wall, puddles that stay after rain, a patio or walk tilting toward the house.

You can Fill and tamp small low spots with soil before the ground freezes.

Call a pro A yard, patio or walk that drains toward the house: a grading or landscape contractor.

3 Outdoor faucets and hoses shut down

Why it matters The normal first freeze is October 13 at Rockford and October 19 at O'Hare [3]. Outdoor faucets are among the pipes that freeze most often [4].

Look for Hoses still connected, an outdoor faucet with no shutoff valve inside, drips.

You can Remove and drain the hoses. Close the inside valve to each outdoor faucet, then open the outdoor faucet to drain and leave it open [4].

Call a pro No inside shutoff, or a leak inside the wall: a licensed pro for the pipe work.

4 Foundation cracks marked and dated

Why it matters In the exceptionally cold winter of 2013-14, frost ran about 10 to 20 inches deep across Illinois, and it has reached 30 inches in the far north [6]. Freezing, heaving soil can crack a wall sideways, which HUD calls potentially serious [5].

Look for Sideways or stair-step cracks, a wall bowing in, cracks that are wet or growing.

You can Pencil a line at each end of a crack, write the date, and photograph it with a tape measure. Check the marks again after the thaw.

Call a pro Sideways cracks or a bowing wall: a structural engineer first. A crack that lets water in: crack repair.

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5 No water signs on the walls or floor

Why it matters Signs of a moisture problem include a damp ring at the base of block walls, staining, white chalky deposits (efflorescence), damp air and odor [7]. Water can come from outside, from inside the house, or from humid air condensing [7], and each needs a different fix.

Look for Those signs, after a heavy rain and again in the first thaw.

You can Walk the basement with a flashlight. Photograph and date what you find, and note whether it follows rain or humid weather.

Call a pro Water that comes back, a wet floor-wall seam, damp spots that spread. Ask where the water gets in before you ask for a price.

6 Pipes on outside walls protected

Why it matters Pipes in unheated basements and along poorly insulated outside walls are among the most likely to freeze [4].

Look for Exposed pipes on outside walls, in cold rooms, and where the water line comes in.

You can Fit foam pipe sleeves. Keep the heat on, and no lower than 55 degrees F when you travel [4]. Learn where the main water shutoff is; it is often by the water meter [8].

Call a pro A pipe you cannot thaw safely, or one that bursts: shut the water off at the main [8], then call a licensed pro. Never use an open flame [4].

7 Furnace filter changed, checkup booked

Why it matters ENERGY STAR advises a heating checkup in the fall and a filter check every month [9]. Have heating equipment inspected yearly, and keep anything that can burn 3 feet from heat sources [10].

Look for An overdue filter, boxes or paint cans near the furnace, no recent checkup.

You can Change the filter. Clear the space around the furnace.

Call a pro A heating technician for the yearly checkup, or when the system short-cycles, smells or cannot keep up.

8 Smoke alarm on the basement level

The law Illinois requires a smoke detector on every story, basements included, and one within 15 feet of every room used for sleeping. A battery-only alarm that is newly installed, over 10 years old or failing needs a sealed long-term battery, unless monitored, wireless or Wi-Fi connected [13].

Look for No alarm in the basement, or one more than 10 years old (the date is on the back).

You can Test alarms monthly. Replace them 10 years after the date they were made [14].

Call a pro Substantially remodeling? The law calls for alarms wired to house power, linked together and with backup power [13]: a licensed electrician.

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9 CO alarm within 15 feet of every bedroom

The law	Illinois requires a carbon monoxide alarm within 15 feet of every room used for sleeping in any home with fuel-burning heat or hot water, or an attached garage [15].
Look for	No alarm near the bedrooms or on the basement level; outside vents buried in snow [16].
You can	Test each alarm as its instructions say. Keep furnace and dryer vents clear of snow [16].
If it sounds	Leave the house right away and call 911 [17].

10 Radon test done

Why it matters	IEMA says all Illinois homes should be tested [18]. The action level is 4.0 pCi/L [19]. Of Illinois homes tested, 41 percent were above it, and basements tend to read higher [20].
Look for	No test on record, or new living space in the basement since the last one.
You can	Run a short-term test kit in the lowest level you live in, exactly as the kit directs.
Call a pro	A result of 4.0 or above: a radon mitigation professional licensed by IEMA [19].

11 A way out of every basement bedroom

The code	A new bedroom created in a basement must have its own escape opening. Repairing or fixing up an existing basement does not by itself require one [21]. Well covers and grilles must open from inside without a key or tool [22].
Look for	A bedroom with no escape window, a window that sticks, a cover you cannot lift from inside.
You can	Open each escape window from inside. Clear the well of leaves now and of snow after storms.
Call a pro	Someone sleeps in a room with no code-size escape window: an egress window, with a permit.

12 Permit before any basement project

The code	Algonquin requires a permit before you build, alter, repair or replace, or change electrical, gas or mechanical systems [11]. Crystal Lake exempts only finish work such as painting and cabinets [12]. Elsewhere, ask your village.
Look for	Framing, wiring or a new bedroom planned without a permit.
You can	Call your village building department before the work starts.
Call a pro	Hiring it out? Ask who pulls the permit, and see it before work starts.

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Your notes

Write down what you found, where and when, and keep the photos to send with an estimate request.

Sources

Numbers in brackets point here. Every source was opened on October 14, 2026, and sources 6, 13 and 21 again on October 26, 2026. Codes and laws change, and villages amend them: your building department has the final word.

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2 International Residential Code 2018, R401.3 Drainage. codes.iccsafe.org/s/IRC2018/chapter-4-foundations/IRC2018-Pt03-Ch04-SecR401.3
3 National Weather Service, Normal First Freeze Information (1991 to 2020 normals). weather.gov/lot/firstfreeze
4 American Red Cross, Preventing and Thawing Frozen Pipes. redcross.org (Get Help, Winter Storm, Frozen Pipes)
5 U.S. HUD, Residential Rehabilitation Inspection Guide: part 1, PDF p.17 (settled backfill); part 2, PDF p.38 (horizontal cracking). huduser.gov/portal/Publications/pdf/rehabinspect_1.pdf and rehabinspect_2.pdf
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7 University of Minnesota Extension, Moisture in basements: causes and solutions. extension.umn.edu
8 Missouri Public Service Commission, Protect Water Pipes. psc.mo.gov/General/Protect_Water_Pipes
9 ENERGY STAR, Maintenance Checklist. energystar.gov/saveathome/heating-cooling/maintenance-checklist
10 U.S. Fire Administration, Heating Fire Safety. usfa.fema.gov
11 Village of Algonquin Code, Chapter 23 Building Codes, 23.02 and amended R105.1. algonquin.org/chapter23
12 City of Crystal Lake Code, Chapter 422 Residential Code, 422-1 and 422-2. ecode360.com/8614029
13 Illinois Smoke Detector Act, 425 ILCS 60/3. ilga.gov
14 U.S. Fire Administration, Smoke Alarms. usfa.fema.gov
15 Illinois Carbon Monoxide Alarm Detector Act, 430 ILCS 135/10 and 135/20. ilga.gov
16 U.S. Fire Administration, Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Prevention. usfa.fema.gov
17 CDC, Safety Guidelines: After a Hurricane or Other Tropical Storm (CO detector advice). cdc.gov
18 Illinois Emergency Management Agency, Radon and Radon in Illinois. iemaohs.illinois.gov/nrs/radon.html
19 Illinois Emergency Management Agency, What Is Radon. iemaohs.illinois.gov/nrs/radon/whatisradon.html
20 Illinois Department of Public Health, Radon FAQ. dph.illinois.gov
21 International Residential Code 2018, R310.1 and R310.6; the same rules are R310.1 and R310.7 in 2021, R319.1 and R319.7 in 2024. codes.iccsafe.org
22 International Residential Code 2018, R310.4 Bars, grilles, covers and screens. codes.iccsafe.org

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