

How to Remodel a Basement



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Working time: Varies based on project scope

Total time: 2 to 4 months

Skill level: Advanced

Project cost: No more than 20% of your home's value

Remodeling a gloomy basement isn't always a high-priority project, especially when there are more critical tasks to consider (like [replacing a leaky roof](#) or installing new windows). The record amount of time spent at home over the past year, however, has made many families acutely aware of the need for more space—space for work, space for school, space to just kick back and relax.

Sometimes it can be hard, if not impossible, to find that space. If you happen to live in one of the 38.3 million single-family homes in the United States with a basement, though, you are already one step ahead. Why leave all that space sitting idle when it has the potential to become a new home office, an extra bedroom or a fitness studio?

When to Remodel a Basement

In terms of basements, “when” is a matter of degree. If the reason for the remodel is about space and space alone, it really comes down to your ability to invest time and money into the project.

But sometimes basements are contaminated with mold or have other structural problems that need immediate attention, says Anthony Wilder, owner of Anthony Wilder, Design/Build Inc. in Cabin John, Maryland. In those cases, a remodel—or at least a partial remodel—is a matter of health and safety (and therefore more urgent).

Safety Considerations

With that in mind, it is always wise to approach a basement remodel from a “better safe than sorry” perspective.

This means checking for moisture and mold before tearing down walls or replacing fixtures and surfaces, and prioritizing the remediation of these sorts of issues above all else (mold is a health hazard that can lead to a variety of respiratory issues).

Staying safe throughout a basement remodel also involves acquiring the right tools and equipment, as well as wearing the right gear, says Stephen Gordon, president and founder of InSite Builders & Remodeling in Bethesda, Maryland.

DIYers, he says, should always wear safety goggles, long pants, proper construction boots, gloves and, for certain aspects of the project, respirator masks (the type designed for this type of work—not the cloth mask you put on for your grocery runs) and helmets.

Furthermore, first aid kits and fire extinguishers should always be in reach, and you should also make sure your work area is well ventilated.

“Safety should be foremost for anybody that is doing a remodeling job,” Gordon says, adding that part of staying safe is understanding your own limits. (In other words, if you’ve never worked on electrical circuitry or plumbing before, don’t make this your first rodeo. [Hire a plumber](#) or electrician if necessary.)

If you are ready to take the plunge on your basement remodel, our step-by-step guide walks you through the basics of the process.

Instructions

Step 1: Check For Moisture

The first step in most remodeling projects is creating a plan. Basements are an exception. Before you can even think about the details of your dream basement, you need to make sure your basement is dry and free of mold.

If it isn’t, getting rid of that moisture and mold is your plan’s top priority (often, all this takes is a smell test, Wilder says).

The source of the problem could be anything from your outdoor landscaping to a leak in the foundation. Once you find it, you can move on to the next step (which will include a mold/moisture mitigation strategy).

TIP: Waterproofing your basement is a multi-step process that is incorporated into many stages of the project. Keep this in mind as you move through the various stages.

Step 3: Clear Out the Space

Unless you are dealing with a completely blank slate (i.e., a new home or an unfinished basement that also happens to be empty), you likely have some cleaning up to do. You'll need a space to toss items that are not salvageable, so order a construction debris bin from your local sanitation department.

Then, enlist the help of your household members and start carrying everything out. And by everything, we mean everything (boxes, furniture, appliances, trash, etc.). The last thing you need is to be tripping over unnecessary items while working on your basement.

Step 4: Demo and/or Prep the Space

Your plan will inform the complexity of this stage. Maybe you need to tear down walls so you can change up the entire layout or perhaps you just need to rip up that 1970s green shag carpet and/or remove some undesirable wallpaper?

In any case, demo needs to happen before you can proceed.

Step 5: Framing, Plumbing and Electrical

Now you are ready to start building out your new space. Framing is first, because it is essentially the backbone of the entire project. Once the framing is complete, you can, and should, work on plumbing and electrical (it is far more feasible to do this while the walls are down).

Step 6: Place Insulation

Insulating your basement will help the space stay warm in the winter and cool in the summer. Once you hang your drywall, you've missed your chance to insulate (unless you tear your walls down), so do it now. Options include spray foam, foam board or fiberglass.

Step 7: Hang Drywall

When the drywall is up, your new basement is starting to take shape. Precise measurements are essential here, so take your time. Also, this one stage where that respirator mask is particularly critical (nobody wants to breathe in drywall dust).

Step 8: Paint, Install Flooring and Place Fixtures

The order of these last few stages isn't set in stone, says Gordon—it really depends on the aforementioned scope. Some will paint first; others will save that for later. Some will have a sink, a shower, cabinets or kitchenette to install; others will not.

The good news is, no matter what you choose to do first, you are getting closer to having that extra space you've been dreaming of.

TIP: Wilder advises avoiding wood flooring in basements, because it will warp in the event of a water-related mishap (laminated or vinyl that looks like wood is a much better choice).

Step 9: Add the Finishing Touches

This step involves a lot of mini-steps—steps that will allow the project to really come together. We're talking cabinet hardware, shelving, light fixtures, blinds or anything that is critical to the look and feel but isn't part of the actual structure.

Step 10: Get Your Final Inspections

The last step in a basement remodel, aside from enjoying your newly remodeled space, is to make sure your work passes inspection (this is for safety and efficacy). The permits you acquired in the early stages will tell you how to go about this (it will likely be a city inspector).

When to Call a Pro

While certain basement-remodeling tasks are doable for the average homeowner (painting, for example), others require advanced skills and a great deal of experience (e.g., plumbing and electrical work).

We advise calling a pro for help anytime you aren't 100% confident in your ability to safely and successfully complete the task.

"Don't bite off more than you can chew," says Wilder. "If you get stuck and can't finish ... you might have to redo it and spend more money than you planned."