

HOW TO PATCH PLASTER

Extracted from article by Bernard Gladstone in American Home June 1966

Anyone who owns a home with plaster walls and ceilings should know how to repair the cracks and holes that appear in that material. Cracks are generally caused by settling of the house, expansion and contraction of the wooden framework, shrinkage of woodwork and trim, or holes left when pictures or fixtures have been removed or after plumbing and electrical repairs.



Generally speaking, you'll use **spackling compound** or similar crack filler for small holes and cracks. For larger holes and cracks more than one-eighth inch across, **patching plaster** is usually used.

Spackling compound is sold as a powder mixed with water before use. It looks like plaster, but is slower drying and easier to apply. If properly used, you'll find that little or no sanding will be required after the patch is dry. There are also ready-mixed spackling compounds that save you the mixing job.

The best tool for patching most jobs is a 3 or 3-1/2 inch flexible putty knife, even for small holes. This width helps feather the edges of the patch so your repairs won't show.

For fine cracks & small holes

Brush away loose dirt or dust, then open the crack slightly with a pointed scraper or a beer-can opener.

With your spackling knife, scoop up a glob of the compound and smear it over the crack. Stroke back and forth across the crack until it is filled, then remove excess material by running the knife along the length of the crack while pressing lightly.

For small holes, pack the compound in and smooth it off at the same time by crisscrossing your strokes. Press hard enough to wipe all excess compound off the wall with your last stroke.

Larger holes & deeper cracks

Larger holes or deeper cracks more than 1/8" across are best filled in two stages. Use patching plaster rather than spackling compound.

Start by chipping away all loose material, then undercut the edges of the opening on each side to make the inside of the crack wider. This helps bond the patching plaster in place.

Mix only as much patching plaster as you can use in about a half hour. Mix to a stiff but workable consistency and wet the edges of the crack or hole thoroughly before applying the first coat.

Fill the depression about halfway, then let this dry hard before proceeding. Wet it down again, then apply a second coat to bring it flush with the surface. When fully dry, sand lightly and use spackling compound to fill any minor depressions in the patch.

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For **persistent cracks** that reopen year after year (usually in corners and above doorways), a new type of flexible patching material often gives a permanent repair. It consists of a heavy-bodied, oil-based compound used with a special fiberglass tape.

- ◆ You brush a coat of the compound onto the wall on each side of the crack, then smooth a strip of the tape into this without actually pressing the material into the crack itself.
- ◆ A second coat of the compound, troweled over the tape, hides it completely. Since the compound remains pliable when dry, it “gives” with expansion and contraction of the wall without cracking or chipping.

Here's **another method** for deep, persistent cracks:

- ◆ Pack tightly with spackling compound in the usual matter, leaving the compound slightly higher than the surrounding wall surface. Then press a strip of gauze tape, available in paint stores, over the crack.
- ◆ Bury the tape with another layer of compound. Use a wider 5 or 6 inch putty knife for this job, to feather the compound out to a thin edge.
- ◆ When dry, sand the patch lightly and apply additional compound if necessary.

Another tricky job is the problem of **filling a hole that goes right through the wall**, like an electrical repair.

- ◆ One method is to wad up several large sheets of newspaper and stuff the paper in the hole until it starts to catch on the opposite side of the partition and forms a backing that will stay in place inside the hole.
- ◆ You can also use pieces of copper or plastic screen wire as a backing. Fold a piece of the mesh into a bowl shape, then push this into the hole so that the open end catches against the opposite side of the wall while the flat part presses against the back side of the hole you want to patch.
- ◆ After the newspaper or wire backing is in place, wet it down with water, then pack plaster around the edges with your putty knife to gradually close the hole. Let each application dry before you apply the next one. Allow to dry overnight, then trowel on additional layers of plaster until the hole is filled level with the surrounding wall surface. For the final smoothing, spread on a thin layer of spackling compound.

On some plaster-patching jobs, you will want to get a stippled or textured finish to match the surface on the existing plaster. Tear up a piece of sponge and use it to pat the spackling compound or patching plaster while it is still wet. For a finer stipple, pat with a ball or cheesecloth or with the tip of an ordinary paintbrush.

If the surface has a sand finish, buy some sand-finish additive at your local paint store and work some of it into the final coat of patching compound. Or finish it smooth, then apply a little sand-finish paint.