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Humidifying Your Instrument

Every winter we repair guitars and other instruments that were damaged by dryness, despite our best efforts to help folks understand how to avoid this. Here are the basic points you'll need to remember:

If your instrument was made with solid woods, and if you live in Wisconsin:

- Humidify throughout the heating season, fall-spring.
- Keep your instrument humidified every day (room humidifier set to 50% or in-case humidifier moistened every day.
- Don't let in-case humidifiers drip!

Still reading? Here's a more detailed explanation.

What instruments need to be humidified?

Instruments made with solid woods are at risk for drying and cracking when or where the humidity is low. Older instruments are at less risk because they've had more years to acclimate to seasonal changes, but even older instruments can be damaged by dryness.

What time of year should instruments be humidified?

In short, humidify throughout the heating season starting about the time your furnace starts coming on. Keep humidifying throughout the heating season until your furnace no longer comes on. (It doesn't matter that you keep your thermostat turned down—the air will still be drying out.)

Options for humidifying

You could use a large room humidifier (like we do). This is especially handy if you have a number of instruments in the same room, or want to keep your instrument out on a stand. Otherwise, we recommend instrument humidifiers such as a Dampit, which is essentially a sponge in a tube. Such individual humidifiers will need to be moistened almost daily. There are a few products that claim you'll only need to moisten them once a month. We have seen complications from some of these, sometimes over-humidifying (yep, it can happen) and in some cases not humidifying adequately after the first few days or so.

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How to use your Dampit (or similar product)

Hold your Dampit under the faucet, then squeeze it out so that it does not drip. This is important—water dripping inside of your instrument can cause damage. Then slip the Dampit into the soundhole of the instrument, and put your instrument in its case (or your humidifier won't really humidify your instrument.) If you choose to keep your guitar on a stand use the plastic soundhole cover that comes with the Dampit.

Early in the fall/winter you might only need to moisten your Dampit a few times a week, but during the height of the heating season plan to moisten your Dampit every day. If you conscientiously keep your instrument well humidified and then you have to leave your instrument for, say, a week, your instrument should be fine. But if you only sporadically use your humidifier your instrument is gradually drying out. You'll now have to work harder for your instrument to catch up. Leave town for a week and you may come back to a problem.

Humid enough for ya?

Ideal humidity level for instruments is about 50% relative humidity. In summer that's no problem around here. Winter is another story. If you use your Dampit really really faithfully you can probably assume that your instrument will be fine. If you're humidifying an entire room you could buy a hardware store variety humidity gauge. They're not scientifically accurate, but they'll give you a ballpark idea. Don't rely on colored paper gauges that come with some instrument humidifiers. With any indicator, don't wait until the gauge reads "Death Valley Days" before starting to humidify.

Warning signs

For fretted instruments, an early warning sign of dryness is sudden buzzing generally everywhere you play it—it's a sign that your instrument is shifting around. Also, on guitars there should normally be a slight amount of arching across the soundboard behind the bridge. If the top of the instrument becomes perfectly flat it's another sign of dryness. Obviously, if cracks appear, or if old cracks reopen, the culprit is probably dryness. Violins can give an early clue by starting to sound tight or shrill, or by the pegs suddenly all becoming loose.

If you discover a problem

If you discover any of the above problems don't wait to have your instrument repaired or it may get worse. We occasionally also find other complications, such as loose braces inside. Don't panic—most of these repairs are pretty straightforward if you don't ignore them too long. And if you discover that your instrument has developed cracks, loosen the strings—this takes the tension off the instrument and helps to minimize further damage.

Where do you live?

This entire discussion assumes that you live somewhere hot and muggy in the summer, and cold and dry in the winter. Move to Arizona, Florida or someplace even more exotic, and you might have a different set of considerations. Live high up in the mountains? The air may be very dry in summer. . . . Winter brings the rainy season? In short, consider the seasons where you live and keep an eye on a humidity gauge if you're not sure.