

## Vacation Checklist: What To Do When Your Home's Alone

You're finally taking the household on a well-deserved vacation. You've arranged to board the dog, and Aunt Martha will babysit the bird.

There's one more precaution to take---safeguarding your home. Fortunately, many of the steps required (absent installing an alarm system) only require elbow grease and a bit of forethought before you hit the road.

Here's a suggested checklist to follow:

1. Stop mail and newspaper delivery. Nothing screams "no one is home" louder than a stack of newspapers on the front porch. If there's a likelihood that packages could arrive while you're away, notify delivery services like UPS, Fed Ex, to hold them so that your front door won't be marked with delivery slips. And, under no circumstance, post "take all deliveries to our next-door neighbor" on your door!
2. If shrubs, trees or bushes block the view of any windows or doors, trim them back. Homes that are set back a distance from the street and/or have heavy, concealing foliage are more likely to be a burglar's welcome target.
3. Don't let your answering machine tell the world you're gone. A generic message like "we can't come to the phone right now" sends fewer adverse signals than "we're not home" or "we're on vacation in the Bahamas". (Remember "Home Alone")
4. Move small valuables to a safe deposit box as well as any credit cards you won't be using. If possible, move larger valuables (like silver, stereo systems, etc.) to a friend or relative's home for safekeeping. Many police departments have property protection programs that etch valuables with your driver's license number. If you can video tape your possessions and place the tape in your safe deposit box, you'll have additional documentation in case of theft or fire. (It's also a great way to prove value for contesting insurance company settlements).
5. Use timers on several lights throughout the house. If possible, place at least one outside light on a timer as well. Leave draperies open a bit, especially on upper-level floors that aren't easily visible.
6. Check all windows (especially on the ground-level floor) to make sure there are no broken panes or loose latches. Deadbolts on exterior doors do deter burglars, as do "Beware of Dog" signs. If you have an extra door key hidden under an outside mat or rock, move it. If it's easy for you to get to, it's equally easy for a thief. If your car will be visible on the property, make sure to remove your garage door opener from it.
7. Amazing as it seems, entire households of furniture have been loaded in moving vans and driven away during a homeowner's absence. Notify at least one neighbor of your trip and/or a representative from "Neighborhood Watch" (if applicable) in your

area. Provide a way to contact you in case of emergency, either by phone or by locations on your itinerary. Additionally, ask the neighbor to query anyone approaching the house while you're gone.

8. Check with your local police department. They may have a program to drive by homes, test locks, and walk into back yards.

9. Have a trusted neighbor hold a spare key. In one case, an unoccupied home had a leak which allowed thousands of gallons of water to accumulate. Had someone simply gone into the house before the owners returned extensive damage could have been avoided.

10. Prepay bills -- it won't do much for household safety but it will allow you to enjoy your vacation more fully.

For just a few dollars and several hours of your time, you'll have greater peace of mind that your home and possessions will be safe, sound, and less likely to catch the attention of a burglar.