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Caring for Your Plumbing System

Care for your pipes so they'll last longer—and prevent a costly plumbing disaster later.



If you notice a leak in your pipes, even a small one, fix it quickly. Otherwise the pipes could corrode and cause water damage or mold.

You probably don't think much about the network of water and sewer pipes inside your walls and under the floors that deliver your hot and cold water and eliminate your waste on demand. But giving your plumbing a little regular attention can prolong its life, prevent leaks, and avoid costly repairs. Here's how to care for the pipes in your house.

Avoid chemical drain-clearing products

Clogged drains are the most common home plumbing problem, and you can buy chemicals to clear them. But these products sometimes do more harm than good. They can actually erode cast-iron drainpipes.

And because they typically don't remove the entire clog, the problem is likely to recur, causing you use the chemicals repeatedly. Each time, they'll eat away at the pipes a little more, Soon, you're going to get leaks.

Better to hire a plumber to snake the drain (usually \$75 to \$150) and completely remove the chunk of hair or grease that's plugging the line. Or you can pick up a snake of your own, for around \$30 at the hardware store, and try clearing the drain yourself.

Prevent future clogging

Clogs aren't just nuisances. Backed-up water puts added pressure on your wastepipes, stressing them and shortening their lifespan. So avoid plug-ups by watching what goes down your drains. That means keeping food scraps out of kitchen drains, hair out of bathroom drains, and anything but sewage and toilet paper out of toilets.

Install screens over drains in showers and tubs, and pull out what hair you can every few weeks to prevent build-ups. Scrape food into the trash before doing dishes, even if you have a disposal and never put liquid grease down the drain; pour it into a sealable container to put in the garbage after it cools.

Grease is only liquid when it's hot, when you pour it down the drain, it cools and becomes solid. Do that enough, and just like a clogged artery, your drains won't work anymore."

Reduce the pressure

As nice as high water pressure can be when you're taking a shower or filling a soup pot, it stresses your pipes, increasing the likelihood of a leak. That drastically reduces the life of your plumbing. It makes your pipe joints, taps, and appliance valves work harder."

You can measure your water pressure with a hose tap gauge, available at the hardware store for under \$10. Attach it to an outside tap and open the line. Normal pressure will register between 40 and 85 psi. If it's above that range, consider hiring a plumber to install a pressure reducer (around \$250).

By the way, adding a low-flow showerhead won't affect pressure in the pipes. It only affects the amount of water coming out of the showerhead itself.

Soften the water

If your water has a high mineral content known as hard water, it can shorten your plumbing's lifespan. Those naturally occurring minerals, usually magnesium or calcium, build up inside your pipes and restrict flow, increasing the pressure. Plus, they can corrode joints and fittings. Although hard water can occur anywhere it's most common in the rural areas.

A white build-up on showerheads and taps is a telltale sign of hard water. Or, if your house receives municipal water service, you can easily find out how hard it is. By law, every municipality must file an annual water quality report with the Environmental Protection Agency. If you have a well, check your most recent water test report for hardness information. Anything over 140 parts per million is considered hard water.

The only way to effectively deal with hard water is by installing a water softener. Most use sodium to counteract the minerals in your water, but new electronic softeners use electromagnetic pulses to dissolve minerals, and have the advantage of not adding sodium to your water.

You'll need a plumber to install a traditional, sodium-based softener, for \$500 to \$1,000. Electronic units start below \$200, and because the pipes don't have to be opened up, you can install one yourself. Keep in mind, though, that you'll need an outlet nearby to power the unit.

If you opt for a sodium-based softener, consider installing a whole-house pre-filter at the same time. Since the plumber will already be cutting into your pipes to install the softener, the pre-filter might add only \$100 to the job. And not only will it give you cleaner drinking water by removing particulates and chlorine, you'll reduce stress on your pipes that can occur when those particles clog tap filters.

Keep your sewer lines or septic tank clear

If you have municipal sewers, hire a plumber to snake your main sewage cleanout every few years. This will cost \$150 to \$250, and will remove tree roots that inevitably work their way into these pipes leading to messy sewage backups. If you have a septic system, get the tank pumped out every three to five years, for \$200 to \$500.

Other ways to avoid trouble

- Learn where your home's main water shut off valve is so if there's ever a leak, you can go straight there and quickly turn off the water to the entire house.
- Remove hoses from outdoor taps in winter to prevent frozen water from cracking the pipes and causing a flood.
- Add pipe insulation to the plumbing in cold parts of your house such as garages, basements, and under floor spaces to avoid frozen pipes (and to shorten the wait for hot water).
- Never use an exposed pipe as a hanger rod for laundry. Doing so can loosen joints and fasteners.
- Fix problems quickly. Even small leaks can make pipes corrode more quickly, and cause significant water damage or mold.

To find out more and get your home inspected call your local independent property inspector on **1800 17 88 22** or email info@ipi.net.au

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