

# Trade Plumbing

Your Bathroom and Heating Supplier

**How to Deal with  
Bathroom Disasters  
without Needing a  
Plumber**

**TP**

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# How to Deal with Bathroom Disasters without Needing a Plumber

## Abstract

This White Paper will take a look at some of the most common problems that can arise with bathroom fixtures and the best ways to address them. We'll look at low water pressure, improper drainage and how to deal with a burst water pipe.

## Introduction

When it comes to bathroom fixtures there are certain problems that occur more often than others. Calling a plumber can be costly and time consuming, but did you know you can resolve most of these bathroom emergencies without needing to call in a professional?

Rest assured you won't need any specialist plumbing knowledge or expensive equipment to follow this guide; it's been written with you in mind. The most you might need to do is pay a quick visit to your local plumbers' merchant.

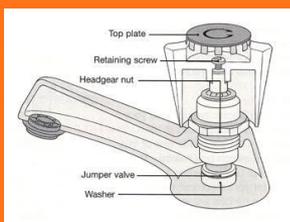
## Troublesome Taps

### My tap is leaking and won't stop. What can I do?

For such a seemingly minor kitchen and bathroom furnishing, taps are notorious for causing more than their fair share of problems.

The most common causes of a leaking tap are that your washer or O-rings are wearing out and need replacing, or the screws holding the washer in place have worked themselves loose.

Cross-section of a standard Tap



The first thing to do is to turn off the hot and cold water supply valves, usually found under your sink. Then locate the screw at the top of the tap handles, often underneath the Hot or Cold covers, unscrew it and lift the handles away. Using an adjustable wrench, loosen the nut beneath and remove the tap spout.

You can check your O-rings at this point. They are the round rubber or plastic rings that sit beneath the tap handles and seal them from leaks.

If the tap is leaking from the handles rather than from the spout, it is likely that one or more of your O-rings has worn away and no longer provides a watertight seal.

If this is the case, you can easily purchase replacement O-rings from your local or online plumber's merchant. If this is not, then you can move to examining the screws holding the washer.

See if they are holding the washer firmly or if they have come loose. If they are loose, tighten them, re-assemble the tap, switch the water supply back on and check whether the tap continues to drip.

If it still does, then take the tap apart again, this time removing the screws and lift out the washer, carefully checking it for visible wear and tear.

If you do find that your washer or O-rings need replacing, we strongly advise that you to take the old part with you when you go to buy the replacement, or provide detailed photographs of serial numbers, logos and any other identifying marks to attach to an email if you are buying online.

Being able to provide this information will make finding a replacement part considerably easier.

## Toilet Trauma

### The toilet won't flush and water backs up into the bowl! What can I do?

It sounds like you have something clogging your pipes. Many items accidentally flushed down the toilet, such as sanitary towels, nappies, children's toys and even toothbrushes have the potential to cause a serious blockage.

It might sound like something you'll need a plumber to take a look at, but fortunately for you this can often be fixed with the use of a plunger.

First make certain your plunger is airtight and has no cracks or holes in it. You should also be using the style of plunger with a fold out cup, as these are specifically designed to fit snugly into the opening of a toilet bowl.

Ensure that there is at least a small amount of water left in the bowl to act as a seal. The plunger should be placed over the bowl, forming an airtight vacuum.

Grasping the plunger handle firmly, start to pump the plunger in a steady back-and-forth motion, forcing air down the pipe. It's very important to keep the pressure even in both directions or you risk breaking the seal and losing the effect. The worse the clog, the more pumping will be required to dislodge it.

Once you're satisfied, break the seal, remove the plunger from the bowl, and try an experimental flush. If the toilet flushes normally now, congratulations! The blockage has been removed.

You should use a specially designed Toilet Plunger like this one



A Toilet Auger is the best way to clear a blockage in the pipes



If it flushes slowly, you may have partially broken up the clog but more plunging work is required. If the toilet continues to back up, you need something more heavy-duty.

Inexpensive and available from all good plumbers' merchants, a toilet auger consists of a J-shaped tube and a cable. It works much the same way as a drain snake, but the cable is wider to better accommodate the size of a standard toilet bowl.

As with a drain snake, first pull the handle all the way out so that the tip of the cable is all that shows at the bottom of the tube. Insert the end of the auger into the toilet bowl and start slowly applying pressure while cranking in a clockwise motion.

When the auger stops moving freely, it has reached the blockage, at which point you should apply firm pressure to each direction in turn to ensure the blockage is fully dislodged.

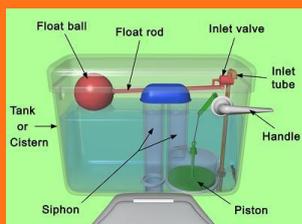
Depending on the size and age of the blockage, you may need to retract the auger and repeat this process several times, flushing after each clearing attempt to see if the blockage has been removed or not.

### **The toilet won't stop running, and sometimes it flushes on its own. Is it possessed?**

No need to call in the exorcist yet. This is a relatively common problem most toilets will suffer during their lives. There are a number of possible causes and each in turn is simple and inexpensive to resolve.

The first and most likely cause is that the piston or flapper, the plastic valve in the cistern tank that blocks water from entering the bowl, is wearing or has worn out completely.

The flapper needs to be watertight to maintain the seal and prevent dripping



Lift the lid carefully off the tank and check inside that the flapper fully covers the hole through which the water enters. If it has slipped out of position, simply remove and re-attach it in the correct place.

If on the other hand it has become chipped or cracked, the flapper will not provide a watertight seal. Water will constantly drip into the bowl and when that excess water reaches a certain level, the toilet will be forced into the flush cycle. You can purchase a replacement flapper from your local or online plumbers' merchant.

If the flapper appears to be in position and working correctly, you should next check the length of the flush chain. This is the chain that lifts the flapper when the handle is pushed, allowing water to enter the bowl as normal.

Your chain should have at least one inch of extra length to compensate or it will allow water pressure to force the flapper up whenever the water inside the tank reaches a certain level. If the chain has inadequate length, simply unhook it from the flush lever and adjust manually.

If both the flapper and chain have been tested and neither of them is causing the fault, the answer must lie with the fill valve or the attached float.

The fill valve and float are both easily accessed and replaced



Check to see if the water level is much higher or lower than the line inside the cistern. If so, then you'll need to adjust or replace the fill valve, or the float, both of which regulate the water level in the tank.

Make sure there is no visible damage to either part, bearing in mind that if do you find any then that part must be replaced. If there is no apparent damage to either part, make sure that they are both in the correct working position.

For the fill valve to be in position, the surface of the water should be no more than one inch above the height of the over-flow tube, located in the middle of the tank.

If you have an old-style float, namely a plastic ball that hangs in the tank and is fixed to a metal arm which connects it to the fill valve, you can actually resolve the problem yourself by carefully bending the metal arm to force the ball to sit lower in the tank, altering the water level.

If on the other hand your toilet is recently made, the float will be a cylinder of plastic around the fill tube that rises and falls with the water level, and this method of repair will not be possible. You'll need to drain the tank completely before you can unscrew, investigate and if necessary replace this newer type of float.

### **The toilet doesn't flush when I push the button. Why isn't it working?**

If you press the button, push the handle or pull the chain but nothing happens, start by checking the flapper chain inside the cistern. It's likely that it has come loose or snapped, and a simple glance inside will tell you. A replacement lift chain can be obtained from the spare parts department of your toilet's manufacturer.

If on the other hand it has simply worked itself loose, manually re-hook it to the handle or flapper valve to solve the problem in seconds.

### **There's never enough water to flush everything away. Why is this happening?**

Check your fill level. If not enough water is getting into the bowl when the flush is activated, you need to raise the fill level to allow more water to enter the bowl.

Re-attaching the flapper chain to the handle takes seconds



However, if this problem is accompanied by foul smells that don't appear to be coming directly from the toilet, then you have a toilet blockage which is allowing sewer gas to pass through it. Refer to the section on unblocking a toilet for guidance.

### Stressed Out with Sinks

#### My sink drains too slowly and is flooding the basin. Is there anything I can do?

This is almost certainly a basin blockage. Basin blockages are dealt with in much the same way as toilet blockages, however as this type of blockage is generally smaller and easier to remove, there are a number of alternative solutions open to you.

Baking soda poured down the sink makes a potent and refreshing cleaning agent when mixed with white vinegar and flushed down with boiling water. The acid in the vinegar reacts with the alkaline in the soda to form a fizzing paste which cuts through blockages like the proverbial hot knife through butter.

If this solution doesn't work, a more powerful and dangerous possibility is to use a chemical drain cleaner, generally some compound of hydrochloric acid.

This is a much more reactive substance which does the same as soda and vinegar to break up the clog but in a fraction of the time. Extreme care must be taken when using corrosive substances such as this and the sink must of course be thoroughly cleansed and allowed to dry before it can be used again.

The natural cleaning properties of baking soda and white vinegar are well documented



## My taps run too slowly and the basin takes forever to fill! How can I increase the water pressure?

It sounds like your aerator has become partially blocked. An aerator comprises of one or more metal or plastic discs with small holes cut in them through which water must pass before it can leave the tap.

These tiny holes are easily blocked with fragments of sediment, metallic debris from your pipes or even lime-scale. This blockage reduces the number of holes the water can escape through, leading to lower water pressure.

Carefully remove the tap spout and lift out the aerator disks. Using a small needle or toothpick, apply gentle pressure to any filled holes. This will break the majority of blockages, although some caked-on sediment may need further treatment before it can be removed.

The tried and tested DIY standby of mixing baking soda, white vinegar and boiling water and leaving it overnight will do the trick, and as a bonus will leave the tap smelling wonderfully fresh.

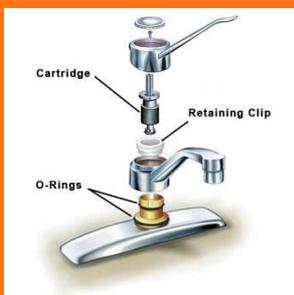
If after cleaning out the aerator and reassembling the tap you find the water pressure is unchanged, then your problem is the valve cartridge. The installation manual that came with the tap will show you how to remove and replace this inexpensive component.

If you do not have the manual to hand, you can visit the manufacturer's website and download an electric copy of the manual directly from them.

A standard aerator. Note the holes through which water flows



Exploded view of a tap showing the position of the valve cartridge



## The Problem with Pipes

**My kitchen pipe just burst and I've got the family arriving in less than an hour for Christmas Dinner! What can I do?!**

One of the worst things that can happen to your home at any time is a burst pipe. Fortunately, there are some steps you can take to minimize the damage right away, as well as precautions you can take all year round to ensure a white, not wet Christmas.

The first and most important thing to do is to switch the water supply off at the mains stop tap as quickly as possible. This is most often located beneath your kitchen sink or where the mains water pipe enters your home.

Wrap towels around the breach to prevent more water from escaping. Drain the remaining water out of the system by turning on all of your cold taps and letting them run dry.

Next, switch off the central heating, the immersion heater and any other heating systems you may be using. Once the heating is off, you can switch on all your hot water taps and allow them in turn to run dry.

Now your pipes should be completely dry, preventing any more water from pouring out and greatly minimizing the damage your home might take from flood water.

Soak up as much of the leak as possible using towels, cloths, sponges, and anything else porous you have to hand.

Burst pipes – a homeowner's worst nightmare



Keep swimming lessons to the swimming pool, not the lounge



You can find a local registered plumber by entering your postcode at the website of the [Chartered Institute of Plumbing and Heating Engineering \(CIPHE\)](#)

You can find a local registered electrician by entering your postcode or town name at the website of the [National Inspection Council for Electrical Installation Contracting \(NICEIC\)](#)

Spare a thought for your pipes this winter as you sit snug and warm inside



At this point we strongly advise you to call your local plumber, who will be highly experienced at repairing this type of rupture and will have all the correct tools required to make repairs.

If water has leaked near electrical appliances of any description, avoid all contact and shut off the mains electricity immediately. Leave the house as soon as possible and contact an electrician. Your safety and that of your family is worth far more than damage to property.

### **I've just discovered a frozen pipe. Should I worry?**

Yes. A frozen pipe should be treated with the same urgency as if you had discovered an actual bursting pipe.

Once the water inside the pipe freezes, the rapid expansion of the water from liquid to solid, and the subsequent increase of pressure on the pipe will easily rip it open and send melting water pouring into your home.

As with a burst pipe, the most important step to take is to switch off the water main stop tap. You should also turn off the stopcock in your cold water tank if you have one, most often located in the loft or attic.

Next you'll need to find the closest tap to the frozen pipe, as this will be the section where the water will be flowing through as it melts. Switch this tap on and take precautions to safeguard anything that may be damaged by water, either by moving it away or covering it with waterproof sheeting.

Blow-torches or heat guns must never be used to thaw a frozen pipe



Finally you are ready to melt the ice inside the pipe. You should use gentle heat sources like hot water bottles or a hairdryer, and work your way slowly from the tap end of the pipe back towards the frozen pipe. Take care not to melt it too quickly, as the resulting sudden torrent of water will likely split the pipe anyway.

The list of heating equipment that is **NOT** suitable for thawing a frozen pipe includes such tools as heat guns and blow-torches, for obvious reasons.

Of course the best way to prevent damage from a burst pipe is to prevent the pipe from bursting in the first place. A little all year round maintenance on a regular basis is the best and simplest way to ensure that your pipes remain intact.

### What should I do to keep my pipes from icing up?

Here are several inexpensive safety precautions you can take to keep your pipes happy and your water flowing:

- ◆ Cover your pipes securely with foam lagging.
- ◆ Apply gentle heat to exposed pipes on a regular basis.
- ◆ Leave kitchen and bathroom cupboards and cabinets open to allow warmer air to circulate around the room.
- ◆ If you're going away on holiday, leave the heating on at approximately 5°C; high enough to prevent pipes icing over but low enough to be cost-effective.
- ◆ Ask a relative, friend or neighbour to check in on your pipes while you're away.
- ◆ Know the location of your stopcock, thermostat, mains power cut-off switch and water main stop tap.
- ◆ Have contact numbers at hand for your local plumber, electrician and hospital.
- ◆ Have a mobile phone charged and ready for use.
- ◆ Check for air leaks around pipes and seal them with caulk or foam lagging.

## Conclusion

### Prevention is Always Better than Cure

Taking safety precautions, carrying out preventative maintenance and regular cleaning of household appliances will minimize the chance of something becoming damaged.

However there are always repairs that you have no choice but to call in a plumber. Attempting DIY on such a repair will be either extremely dangerous or likely to cause additional damage to the appliance because you lack the appropriate tools or knowledge to tackle the job.

Always bear in mind the golden rule of home plumbing: "If in doubt, call a professional". Spending a little money on hiring a plumber now can save you far more in terms of time, inconvenience and the security of your family.

## Our Vision

TradePlumbing is committed to providing quality knowledge and free access to basic resources & tools for people interested in improving their homes and for plumbing and heating professionals, while continuously updating its product portfolio with stylish, high quality products, perfectly fitted for every bathroom, kitchen or any other room in the house.

## About Us

TradePlumbing.co.uk is a trading name of Clayton Horsnell LTD, a privately held company with headquarters in Colchester, UK, providing a wide variety of plumbing products including bathroom suites, baths, showers, towel rails, furniture, sinks, heating systems, radiators, taps and water treatment products.

### TradePlumbing.co.uk

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