

PREVENTING WATER LEAKS AND FROZEN PIPES



Leaking water pipes, faucets and toilets can be an expensive problem. Frozen pipes can be a nightmare. Here are some tips for preventing these problems and ideas for dealing with water pipe issues if they occur.

FINDING WATER LEAKS

Leaks are a slow, steady way to waste hundreds of gallons of water. Luckily, you can fix many household plumbing problems yourself with the help of a good do-it-yourself repair book or helpful hardware store clerk.

Faucets

A dripping faucet that fills a cup in 10 minutes wastes more than 3,200 gallons of water a year. You can easily fix most faucet leaks by replacing the washer or cartridge.

Toilets

Most toilet leaks occur at the overflow pipe near the top of the tank, or near the flapper or the ball valve at the bottom of the tank. To see if you have a leak, run the following test:

- Take the lid off the tank, flush and watch what happens.
- See if the water level comes up to about a half-inch below the overflow pipe (the normal level). Gently adjust the float arm, if necessary, so the valve shuts off at that water level.
- Drop a little food coloring in the tank and — without flushing — see if any color appears in the bowl. If it does, you have a leak in or around the flapper or ball valve. If you don't feel comfortable trying to fix the leak yourself, call a plumber.

Other leaks

You can't see some leaks. If you suspect a leak but can't find one, shut off the water supply to your house and then go look at your water meter. If the numbers are still increasing or the indicator dial is still turning, you probably have a hidden leak. A plumber can help you find it and fix it. Ignoring a leak will waste water and possibly cause serious damage to your home and property.

IMPORTANT!

Know where the main shut-off valve is for your home's water supply. In many homes, it's in the basement. Don't have a basement? Check outside near the foundation or in the crawl space. In some older homes, the valve may be buried, making it difficult to find. If you can't locate it or it's not reachable, call a plumber and have a new one installed. When a major leak occurs, you need to be able to shut off the supply of water to your home.

PREVENTING FROZEN PIPES

Preventing frozen pipes is much easier than dealing with them after the fact. It's a good idea to take some of these steps every fall to prepare your pipes for the cold season ahead:

- If you leave for the winter, turn off the main shut-off valve to your water supply and drain your faucets (*some homes with basements have separate shut-off valves for each outdoor faucet, in addition to the home's main supply valve*).
- Disconnect all garden hoses and wrap all outdoor faucets with rags, newspaper or insulating material. Cover the wrap with plastic or other material to keep moisture/rain from getting inside.
- Cover foundation vent holes to keep your crawl space warmer (*remember to uncover these vents when the winter freeze is over*).
- Insulate any exposed pipe. Use heat tape if necessary.

You can take other preventative steps once cold weather begins:

- During freezing spells, keep a trickle of water running from your indoor faucets to prevent the pipes from freezing. A small trickle of water will cost you a few extra cents a day and save you the huge cost of repairing frozen pipes and dealing with water damage. You should also keep cabinet doors below sinks open so that the warm interior air can get to your pipes and drains.
- If you're leaving home for a few days, keep your heating system turned on and set to a low temperature so that some heat is available to keep pipes from freezing.

If it's freezing outside and you can't get any water out of one or more faucets, you probably have a frozen pipe. In this case, turn off your home's water supply at the main shut-off valve. If the pipe is broken, turning the water off will reduce water damage to your home that may occur after the pipe thaws. When you're without water, you also should turn off your water heater to prevent damage to it. If you know where the frozen pipe is and it's easy to get to, you can try to thaw it out yourself. Sometimes pouring hot water on the pipe helps, or you can use an electric hair dryer or heat lamps. You can also try wrapping heat tape over the frozen section of pipe.

If you can't find the frozen pipe or thaw it yourself, call a plumber.

NEVER use a propane torch or any other type of open flame to try to thaw your pipes — you might start a fire in your home.

For more information, contact Clark Public Utilities Water Services at 360-992-8022.