

Home maintenance and repair

A Leaking Water Heater can be dangerous and Costly

Water heaters sometimes [leak from the drain valve or relief valve](#). Those valves are easy to replace. But if a leak is coming from the tank, [you've got serious trouble](#). The tank is lined with a thin coat of glass. Eventually, that glass begins to crack, the steel begins to rust away and a puddle appears. Left alone, the tank will rupture, causing an instant flood. It may take months for a [leak to become a flood](#), or it may take days. But it will happen so don't gamble. Replace the water heater now!

Make Your Furnace Last

Regular filter replacement is the very best thing you can do to [keep your furnace in top condition](#). And here's a way to keep track of that task: Buy several filters and label them. With some systems, [monthly filter changes are best](#).

How to Flush the Toilet When the Power's Out: Flush With a Bucket

Even if a [power outage](#) stops your well pump or the city water supply, you can still flush the toilet. Dump a couple gallons of water into the bowl or fill the toilet tank. This works just as well as the usual flush but won't refill the bowl. Still clogged?

Soaps, cleaners and Shampoos

Synthetic soaps [make cleaning your shower or bath easier](#) because they don't contain the ingredients that create tough soap scum. Any liquid or gel soap is synthetic. Most bar soaps are standard soaps. But a few, including Zest and Ivory, are synthetic.

What's R-Value?

R-value is a measure of the resistance to heat flow, a way of indicating insulation's ability to stop heat from moving through it. The higher the number, the better. [Insulation is labeled by total R-value](#). Two factors determine that number: the thickness of the insulation and the insulating ability of the material. The fiberglass batts shown here, for example, are all the same thickness but differ in R-value because of their different densities.

Don't Trust Breaker Panel Labels

Inside [your main electrical panel](#), you'll see labels or lists indicating which breaker controls which circuit. These labels are a reasonably good guide, but they're not completely reliable, especially in older homes that have been through remodeling projects.

For example, you might find that there's one outlet in a room that's not on the same circuit as all the others in that room, yet it's not listed elsewhere at the panel. That orphan outlet could be connected to almost any other circuit in your home. In some cases, you might even find wires from different circuits in the same junction box. The bottom line: Always use a voltage detector to make sure the power is off before you do any electrical work. Have electrical questions?

Before You Buy a Toilet

Here's a story we've heard a hundred times: Homeowners go toilet shopping and decide that an 'elongated bowl' would be an improvement over the old 'round' bowl. Only later — usually after installation — they discover that the bathroom door can't be closed, and laughing, crying or swearing follows. So if you want a longer bowl, measure first. A typical elongated toilet protrudes 2 in. more than a standard model. Also check the clearance for any nearby cabinet doors.

Find a reliable handyman

One of the best things you can do for yourself (and for your house) is to find a reliable and trustworthy handyman to help with home projects. A good handyman should be a "jack of all trades," who is able to help with a number of home service needs. From hanging artwork to installing light fixtures, you'll need someone to assist with various tasks once you move in.

Maintain an emergency fund for unexpected home problems

As a new homeowner, you should be prepared to deal with unexpected (and expensive) problems that might arise with the home. These problems could include your AC system dying, plumbing problems, mold problems, pest problems and structural issues.

Unfortunately, fixing these problems is typically costly. It's helpful to have a safety net – or emergency fund – set up to pay for these type of home problems.

Stopping the Drips

[Leaky faucets can be fixed](#) with a little elbow grease and know-how. First, turn off the water to the sink and stop the drain with a rag so you don't lose any small parts while you're dismantling the faucet. A compression faucet needs a new rubber washer to seal the valve, and a drippy washerless faucet can be stopped up with a new O-ring.

Caring for Hardwood Floors

Hardwood floors are often a home's most inviting feature. You can keep them that way with proper care. Use cleaning products designed for hardwood—other cleansers can cause damage. A little water on a cloth [works wonders on spills](#), but too much water will damage the wood. For fabulous floors, vacuum frequently using a hardwood floor attachment to grab dust from between boards without scratching.

Replacing a Shower Head

Replacing a shower head is a small project with a big impact. Remove the existing shower head, then lay thread seal tape at the base of the shower arm before screwing in the new piece. Don't fasten it too tightly. [Replace the shower arm](#) if you like—they're often sold separately.

Locating Wall Studs

Hanging a shelf or a heavy mirror? It's best to [know where your wall studs](#) are before you start—to save your time and your walls! When you knock on a wall, a spot with the stud behind it will sound solid. Alternatively, use a magnetic stud finder that beeps when it locates the nails in the boards.

Getting Tiles Sparkling Clean

[For squeaky-clean porcelain tiles](#), sweep and vacuum twice a week. Soak with a water-vinegar mixture for 5 to 10 minutes once a month for a deep clean, and scrub with a soft-bristled brush. Dry with a microfiber cloth. To keep tiles looking new, avoid bleach, wax, oil-based cleansers, and hard scrubbers.

Unclogging a Sink

If you have a clogged sink, skip the chemical drain cleaners—they probably won't fix anything. Your problem may be a blocked P-trap. [Check this U-shaped pipe](#) under the sink by first placing a bucket underneath it and then unscrewing the pipe.

Replacing a Faucet

Replacing a faucet might sound impressive, but it's [not too tough](#). Choose a new fixture that has holes in the same locations as the old one to ensure that it will fit properly on the sink. Before working under the sink, snap a picture so you know how to put everything back together. Shut off the water, drain the faucet, then follow the manufacturer's instructions.

Making a Sandbox

A [sandbox](#) brings kids hours of fun and is simple to make. Use pressure-treated pine boards for a sturdy frame. Neighborhood cats are notorious for their love of sandboxes, so while you're at it, consider making a lid as well. Finish with stain or paint and (not least of all) sand.

Servicing the Lawn Mower

Your lawn mower should be serviced once a year, but it's something any homeowner can learn to do themselves. To ensure your lawn mower stays in tip-top shape, check the blades and [sharpen if needed](#), clean the deck, add a fuel stabilizer, [check the oil](#) and spark plugs, and clean the filter.

Inspecting the Fireplace

Every homeowner should be able to inspect their fireplace and chimney prior to using it in winter, and [identify problems that need a professional to manage](#). Make sure to clear away any remaining ash and clean the fire box. Then, check for cracks in the chimney both inside and out. Confirm the chimney cap is firmly attached and make sure the damper can open and close the way it should. With regular attention, your fireplace can keep you safely cozy for years to come.

It is important to have your fireplace properly inspected and [cleaned by a pro](#) before lighting for the first time each year. This will help to deter any hazards that could start a fire in your home, such as chimney blockage, weather deterioration, or invasive animal nests. It is also a great time to ask questions about how to safely use your fireplace.

Resetting a Circuit Breaker

[When a circuit breaker trips](#), you temporarily lose power to your home, or a part of it. Resetting it is most often an easy fix. Just open your breaker box and find the switch that doesn't look like all the rest. It might be set in the opposite direction, or just lightly off alignment. Push it to the OFF position, and then push it back ON.