

PLUMBING PICKS

The Homeowner's Plumbing Survival Handbook

Stop leaks, clear clogs, and fix the 12 most common plumbing problems yourself —
and know exactly when to call a pro.

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Welcome

Most plumbing problems in a house are not emergencies, and most do not require a plumber. They require knowing two things: how to stop water fast, and which five-minute fix solves the problem. After years as a licensed plumber, I have watched homeowners pay hundreds of dollars for repairs they could have done themselves in under an hour.

This handbook is the field guide I wish every homeowner had. It is organized so you can flip straight to your problem, follow clear steps, and get back to your day. Keep it on your phone or print it and tape it inside a cabinet near your water heater.

How to use this guide: In an emergency, go straight to Section 1. For a specific problem, jump to Section 3. For prevention, see Section 6 — the maintenance schedule that keeps you out of trouble.

Table of Contents

1. **The 90-Second Emergency Response** — what to do when water is everywhere
2. **Know Your Shut-Offs** — water, fixtures, and gas
3. **The 12 Most Common Fixes** — step-by-step
4. **When to DIY vs. Call a Pro** — the honest rules
5. **The Homeowner's Tool & Parts Kit**
6. **The Seasonal Maintenance Schedule**
7. **Money-Saving Habits**

1. The 90-Second Emergency Response

When water is flowing where it should not be, every second counts. Do this in order:

1. **Stop the water at the source.** If it is one fixture (toilet, sink, washer), turn its local shut-off valve clockwise. If you cannot find it or it is a burst pipe, go to the main shut-off (Section 2) and turn the whole house off.
2. **Kill power if needed.** If water is near outlets, the panel, or an electric water heater, shut off the relevant breaker. Never stand in water to reach electrical equipment.
3. **Contain it.** Towels, a bucket, and a wet/dry vac. Move valuables off the floor.
4. **Relieve pressure.** After the main is off, open the lowest faucet in the house to drain the lines and reduce dripping.
5. **Assess.** A clean-water leak you have stopped is not urgent — you have time to fix it right. Sewage backups, gas smells, or anything you cannot stop are calls to a pro now.

Call immediately, do not DIY: sewage backing up into the home, the smell of gas, water near the electrical panel you cannot safely de-energize, or flooding you cannot stop at the main.

2. Know Your Shut-Offs (Before You Need Them)

Find these today, while it is calm. Tag them so anyone in the house can find them in the dark.

Main water shut-off

Usually where the water line enters the house — near the front foundation wall, in a basement/crawlspace, near the water heater, or at the street meter (you may need a meter key). Turn clockwise to close.

Fixture shut-offs

Toilets and sinks have small oval or football-shaped valves on the supply lines beneath them. Washing machines have two (hot and cold) behind the unit. Turn clockwise.

Water heater

There is a shut-off on the cold inlet at the top. For electric, also flip its breaker; for gas, turn the gas control to "off."

Gas (if applicable)

The main gas shut-off is at the meter — a quarter-turn valve. If you ever smell gas, leave first, then call the gas company from outside. Do not flip switches.

3. The 12 Most Common Fixes

1. Running / Phantom-Flushing Toilet

Cause: Worn flapper (most common) or a bad fill valve. **Fix (~\$8, 5 min):** Turn off the toilet supply, drain the tank, unhook the old flapper, snap in a matching new one, reconnect the chain with a little slack. If the tank still runs, replace the fill valve.

2. Clogged Toilet

Fix: Use a flange plunger with firm, steady plunges. If that fails, use a toilet (closet) auger — crank it through the trap to break or retrieve the clog. Avoid chemical drain cleaners in toilets.

3. Slow or Clogged Drain

Fix: Plunge first. Then remove and clean the P-trap under the sink (bucket underneath), or run a drain snake to reach the blockage. Maintain with an enzyme cleaner monthly. **Skip the acid drain chemicals** — they damage pipes and rarely fix the real clog.

4. Dripping Faucet

Cause: Worn cartridge, washer, or O-ring. **Fix:** Shut off the supply valves, remove the handle and cartridge, and replace with the matching part. Bring the old cartridge to the store to match it exactly.

5. Low Water Pressure

Fix: If it is one faucet, unscrew the aerator and clear the debris. If it is the whole house, check that the main valve is fully open and test pressure with a gauge (40–60 psi is normal); a failing pressure regulator may need replacement.

6. Leaking Pipe

Fix: Shut off water. For a small leak, a pipe repair clamp or repair tape is a solid temporary fix. For a permanent repair, cut out the bad section and join with push-to-connect fittings (no torch needed) or soldered/PEX connections.

7. Garbage Disposal Jammed (Humming)

Fix: Cut the power. Insert the hex wrench into the slot on the bottom center and work it back and forth to free the flywheel. Press the red reset button underneath, restore power, run cold water, and test.

8. Toilet Won't Flush Well

Causes: Clogged jets under the rim, a flapper closing too soon, or low tank water level. Clean the rim jets, adjust the float for a higher water level, and check the flapper chain slack.

9. Water Heater: No Hot Water

Electric: Check the breaker and press the reset button on the thermostat. **Gas:** Check that the pilot/igniter is lit and the gas is on. Sediment buildup also reduces capacity — flush the tank annually.

10. Hard Water Buildup

Signs: White scale, spotty dishes, crusty aerators. **Fix:** Soak fixtures and aerators in vinegar to dissolve scale; install a salt-based water softener to protect your pipes and water heater long-term.

11. Sweating / Leaking Under the Sink

Fix: Tighten supply-line and P-trap connections by hand plus a quarter turn. Replace a corroded supply line with a braided stainless one. Persistent condensation can mean a humidity issue rather than a leak.

12. Frozen Pipes

Prevent: Insulate exposed pipes, disconnect hoses before winter, and let a faucet trickle in a hard freeze. **If frozen:** open the faucet and warm the pipe gently with a hair dryer or heat tape — never an open flame. If a pipe has burst, shut off the main immediately.

4. When to DIY vs. Call a Pro

Do it yourself	Call a licensed plumber
Flapper, fill valve, aerator, supply line, faucet cartridge swaps	Anything involving the main sewer line or repeated whole-house backups
Plunging and snaking accessible clogs	Gas line work or gas appliance connections
Replacing a toilet, faucet, or garbage disposal	Water heater replacement (especially gas) and venting
Pipe repairs with push-to-connect fittings	Leaks inside walls/slab, or sewage/septic issues
Installing a bidet seat or shut-off valve	Anything requiring a permit or that you are not confident shutting off

The golden rule: if you cannot confidently shut off the water to what you are working on, stop and call a pro. A \$200 service call is cheaper than a flooded floor.

5. The Homeowner's Tool & Parts Kit

Keep these on hand and you can handle 90% of problems the moment they happen:

- **Tools:** flange plunger, toilet auger, drain snake, channel-lock pliers, adjustable wrench, basin wrench, screwdrivers, PTFE thread tape, a headlamp, and a small bucket.
- **Parts to stock:** a universal flapper, a fill valve, a few braided supply lines, assorted O-rings/washers, a pipe repair clamp, and a tube of plumber's grease.
- **Nice to have:** a wet/dry vac, a water pressure gauge, and a couple of push-to-connect fittings for fast pipe repairs.

For current product recommendations on every item above — tested and chosen by a licensed plumber — see the guides at plumbingpicks.com.

6. The Seasonal Maintenance Schedule

When	Do this
Monthly	Pour an enzyme cleaner down kitchen/bath drains; check under sinks for drips.
Every 3 months	Test the sump pump (pour in water); clean faucet aerators; check toilet flappers for leaks (food-coloring test).
Spring	Inspect outdoor spigots for freeze damage; check the water heater's pressure-relief valve.
Fall	Disconnect and drain hoses; insulate exposed pipes; flush sediment from the water heater.
Yearly	Flush the water heater; test the main shut-off valve; replace the water heater anode rod every 3–5 years.

7. Money-Saving Habits

- **Fix running toilets fast** — a silent leak can waste hundreds of gallons a day and inflate your bill.
- **Never pour grease down the drain** — it is the #1 cause of kitchen clogs.
- **Know your water pressure** — over 80 psi stresses every fixture and shortens their life; add a regulator if needed.
- **Soften hard water** — scale destroys water heaters and fixtures; a softener pays for itself in appliance life.
- **Replace the water heater before it fails** — at 10+ years, proactive replacement beats a flooded floor and emergency rates.

Thank you. Keep this handbook handy, and visit plumbingpicks.com for step-by-step guides, product picks, and the free Ask-a-Plumber assistant whenever a new problem pops up. — Isaac

This handbook is for general homeowner guidance. When in doubt, or for gas, sewer, and in-wall work, consult a licensed plumber. © 2026 Plumbing Picks.