Winterize Your Plumbing: The Honest Checklist



Honest Bob Co. — For the people who fix it. · Written by a working plumber.

Do it in fall, before the first hard freeze.

Which way? Turn a valve clockwise to close it (off) and counterclockwise to open it (on): "righty tighty, lefty loosey." Lever handle? Across the pipe is usually off, in line with the pipe is on.

Outside

- [ ] Disconnect, drain, and store garden hoses. (Even "frost-free" spigots can split with a hose left on.)
- [ ] Shut off each outdoor spigot (also called a hose bib or outdoor faucet) at its indoor shutoff valve. Then open the spigot outside to drain it. Open it all the way, then turn it back just slightly, so it's not fully open or fully closed and no water gets trapped inside to freeze.
- [ ] No indoor shutoff for a spigot? Plumbers recommend adding one. It lets you winterize or replace that spigot without shutting off water to the whole house.
- [ ] Sprinkler system: have it blown out by a pro. If the backflow preventer (often called an RPZ) is outside, it also needs to be drained and removed for winter.

Inside

- [ ] **Find your main water shutoff.** Tag it, and show everyone in the house.
- [ ] "Exercise" your shutoff valves every 3 to 6 months. Turn the main and each sink and toilet shutoff all the way closed, then back open. Valves that never move can seize up and fail when you need them most. If one drips afterward, call a plumber.
- [ ] Pipes in unheated spaces (crawlspace, garage, attic) should be insulated. Pipes inside the heated part of your home usually don't need it, and insulation there can hide normal condensation that looks like a leak.
- [ ] Where pipes pass through an outside wall, make sure the gap is sealed with the right material so cold air can't blow on them. Keep the garage door closed in freezing weather.

Equipment

- [ ] **Get a water alarm.** It sits on the floor near the water heater, sump pump, or washer and sounds off when it gets wet. Cheap battery ones work fine (just change the battery). If you travel a lot, get one that alerts your phone.
- [ ] Have your sump pump checked once a year. Most last about 3 to 5 years with heavy use, longer with light use.
- [ ] Water heater: check for leaks or rust at the base. Set it to 120°F. On many gas dials, "Hot" is about 120°F, and the letters above it run hotter. Don't turn it up past that.
- [ ] Leaving town? Set a gas or propane water heater to "Vacation" (VAC) or "Pilot."

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Cold Snaps

- [ ] Open sink cabinets on outside walls so warm air reaches the pipes.
- [ ] No heat? If your furnace isn't working, shut off the water to the house until the heat is fixed.
- [ ] Never thaw a pipe with an open flame. Use a hair dryer, not a torch.

Gone for a While? (Winter Trips & Snowbirds)

- [ ] Keep the heat at **55°F or higher.**
- [ ] Shut off the main water valve so nothing can burst while you're gone. (If you have fire sprinklers, that line usually has its own valve. Leave it on and shut off the house line.)
- [ ] Then open the faucets to drain the lines and let air in, so water isn't left sitting in the pipes.
- [ ] Have someone check the house if it gets really cold.
- [ ] **When you get back:** water that sat in the lines for weeks or months can go stale and discolored. Turn the main back on slowly and run every faucet and shower for 5 to 10 minutes to flush it out before you use it.

Turning the Main Off and Back On

- **Before you shut it off:** if the water will be fully off, first take off the shower heads and faucet aerators (the little screens on the faucet tips) so sediment (grit from the pipes) doesn't clog them. Put them back after the water runs clear.
- **Turning it back on:** open the main slowly (counterclockwise). Turning it on too fast can pop a fixture or clog fixtures with sediment.
- **Optional tip:** pull-down kitchen faucet heads can slip down inside the gooseneck (the curved spout) and be hard to pull back up. If you take that head off, hold onto it while the water runs.

> **Safety:** Only use heat tape and space heaters that are rated for the job, exactly as the instructions say, and keep them away from anything that can burn.



Bob says: An hour of this in October costs a lot less than a flooded basement in January.

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Frozen Pipe? Do This.

Go slow, warm it gently, and never use a flame.

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Signs a Pipe Is Frozen

- It's below freezing and a faucet gives only a trickle, or nothing at all.
- One faucet works but another doesn't, or a toilet won't refill.
- Frost on a pipe you can see.

1 Know where your main shutoff is

A frozen pipe can split, and the leak may not show until the ice melts. Find your main water shutoff **before** you warm anything.

Main shutoff: _____

2 Open the faucet

Open the faucet that pipe feeds, hot and cold. Running water helps melt the ice, and you'll know it's working when water starts to flow.

3 Find the cold spot

Check pipes on outside walls, under sinks, and in the crawlspace, garage, attic, or basement, near where the water line comes in.

4 Warm it up gently

- **Hair dryer:** start near the faucet and work back toward the frozen spot. Stay out of standing water.
- **Warm towels:** soak towels in hot water and wrap the pipe. Or wrap a dry pipe with an electric heating pad.
- **Space heater:** keep it at least 3 feet from anything that can burn, and never leave it running alone.
- Open the cabinet doors and turn up the heat.

Keep going until full pressure is back. Then check the other faucets. If one pipe froze, others may have too.

Never Do This

- **No torch, lighter, or any open flame.** It can start a fire inside the wall.
- **No propane, kerosene, or charcoal heater indoors.** They can fill the house with carbon monoxide.
- **No hair dryer or space heater near standing water.**

Shut Off the Main and Call a Licensed Plumber If

- The pipe is split, cracked, or bulging.
- You see or hear any leak, even a small drip.
- There's still no water after you've warmed it.
- You can't find the frozen spot, or it's inside a wall, ceiling, or floor.

Keep It From Happening Again

- Keep the heat on, the same day and night. Going away? Leave it at 55°F or higher.
- On the coldest nights, open sink cabinets on outside walls. Move cleaners out of kids' reach.
- Keep the garage door closed.
- Take hoses off outdoor spigots, close the indoor valves, and let the spigots drain.
- Insulate pipes in the crawlspace, garage, and attic.
- Heat goes out? Shut off the water to the house until the heat is working again.
- Same pipe freezes every winter? Ask a licensed plumber about better insulation or moving it.



Bob says: Hair dryer, not a torch. Every single time.

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