

HOW TO THAW FROZEN WATER PIPES

One of the hazards of winter that a lot of people have experienced is frozen water pipes. Since water expands as it freezes it creates tremendous pressure on the pipes, which in turn can cause them to break and damage your home. To safely and effectively thaw frozen water pipes you must first diagnose where the pipe is frozen.

Start by turning on every faucet in the house, including the bathtub faucets. This will help you determine the area of the blockage. If the water in the kitchen sink is frozen but the water in the bathroom sink works, then you are probably dealing with an isolated problem. Once you have figured out which faucet contains the frozen line, turn off all other faucets.

Step one: Locate the main water shut-off valve, which could be located in the basement, the garage, or outside by the foundation and turn off the water supply to the house. If there is no shut-off valve, you may have to turn the water off at the meter itself. It is important to shut off the water prior to thawing the pipes as a pipe may already have broken under the extreme pressure caused by the frozen line.

Step two: Now that the water is turned off, you have a few options to thaw the pipe:

1. Use towels soaked in hot water. Wrap the frozen pipe with hot, wet towels and pour on additional hot water until the pipe has completely thawed.
2. A hair dryer or heat gun may be the next solution. Turn on the dryer or heat gun and work up and down the length of the frozen line. Once the water starts to thaw and trickle from the faucet, you can turn the main water supply back on. Keep working with the heat source and keep the water faucet turned on until full water pressure is restored.

If every faucet in the house is frozen, you are probably dealing with a frozen main water line that supplies water to the house. Turn on all faucets in the sinks and bathtub and turn off the main water supply. Follow the suggestions in step two but apply the heat directly to the pipe that enters the house.

If your pipes have frozen once, chances are they will freeze again. Here are some tips to keep your pipes working in all seasons.

Wrap outside water pipes or water pipes located under the house or crawl spaces with an insulation material such as newspaper or electric heat tape taking special care to cover all elbow joints, valve bodies, tees and any other fittings. Electric heat tape is available at your local hardware store. You must know the measurement of the length of the pipe to determine the amount of electric heat tape needed as it is sold in ready-made lengths and cannot be cut or otherwise modified. The electric heat tape can be run along the length of the water pipe and secured with cable ties or it can actually be wrapped around the pipe itself to provide additional heat for extremely cold weather. Follow the manufacturer's instructions when applying the tape.

When temperatures drop, open up the cabinets under all the sinks in the kitchen and bathrooms to allow warm air to circulate in and around the pipes.

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Leave the water dripping in all faucets and bathtubs during the coldest weather.

Keep the thermostat set at a constant temperature both day and night. If your home is unoccupied during extremely cold weather, keep the thermostat no lower than 55°F.

Never use a heat source with an open flame such as a blowtorch or propane heater to thaw a frozen water line as an open flame in a home can present a serious fire hazard as well as the possibility of exposure to carbon monoxide poisoning. Also, excessive heat from a blowtorch applied to a frozen pipe can cause the water inside the pipe to boil and possibly explode.

After the Thaw:

Once the water pipe is thawed and flowing normally, check carefully for any pipe cracks that might have developed. If there are any leaks the plumbing must be repaired as soon as possible. Now that problem spots have been identified, think of better precautions to take in the future.