

COLUMN FOR FEBRUARY 21, 2004.  
HEADLINE; TOILET TROUBLES!!!

Q; Recently we have had our toilet clog up a number of times and there also seems to be some water around the edge of the base of it. We use the plunger and it works for a few days and then comes back, any suggestions?

A: Although mechanically simple, toilets are subject to malfunctions from time to time and blockage of some form is the most common problem. There are two kinds of plungers on the market, a simple red coloured round rubber model and a black model with a moulded head that has a sleeve inside that pulls out to give a better fit to the opening in the bottom of the bowl. This type is the better plunger. I have often heard where someone will plunge the toilet and get it running and then quit. Sometimes this only partially clears the bowl. Try some food colouring and it should clear the bowl fully, if not the blockage is likely still present. I recommend the better model and repeatedly plunge the toilet and flush three or four times until it appears to clear the bowl fully. The next step if this does not work is to purchase an auger or "snake" as it is also called. These are a flexible metal cable with a crank on the end. I have also seen a compressed gas canister and a pump style of compressed air on the market and according to my plumber friend, some work and some don't, He likes the "snake". Wearing long rubber gloves, feed the flexible cable into the passageway until you find resistance and then holding the tube on the end, turn the crank and push the auger up and down at the same time. Depending upon what the blockage is the "snake" may snag the blockage or loosen it enough that a couple of flushes will do the trick. I would then take the plunger and give it a number of repeated actions just to be sure. Under no circumstances use any form of chemical drain cleaner, the gas reaction from a number of these cleaners is not safe.

If this is not successful, then removal of the toilet is the next step. First shut the water off and give the toilet one last flush, this should drain the toilet, You should find a small chrome tap under the tank and turn it in, it may leak so have a small bucket or pan ready. If your toilet is a two-piece unit as most are, there are bolts under the tank that attach it to the bowl. If you don't think you can lift the toilet in one piece, disconnect these bolts and remove the tank. Toilets are surprisingly heavy and awkward. If you can do this in one move however, then on the side of the bowl there are generally two caps covering a "T" style bolt that is fitted into a slot on the floor flange. Loosen the nuts, remove them, now give the toilet a slight twist to break the wax seal and it should now lift off. You have now exposed the floor flange and the remains of the wax seal. It is not uncommon for blockage to happen at this point. This is also your opportunity to check for leaks around the toilet, as the wax seals are known to fail. If this is clear then your blockage is in the actual drainage pipe and I would suspect that you have noticed the sinks and bathtub also drain slowly too. I would snake this line and run some water in the floor flange to see if it clear quickly. The last thing I would check is your vent stack on the outside of the home. I see older stacks that get covered over in ice and this stops a proper flush. I have seen birds nest on them and debris get in them, although this is not common. If you have exhausted all of these avenues and still the toilet drain does not work or drains slow, it is time to call the plumber. He will find the clean-out plug and using a power auger go into your drain to the city sewer line or your septic tank. It is not uncommon for roots to invade older cast drains, settlement of the soils around your home can shift the pipe and it loses its proper slope and causes a blockage. I saw one home a few years ago where the line was not installed with correct slope and the plastic line actually filled with debris, froze and cracked; this caused a discharge problem and a very expensive excavation bill.

With respect to the water around the toilet, are you sure it is the base of the toilet and not the fill line? Check the supply line tap and the connections; I have seen where a tightening of the connections will stop the leak. Toilets take a beating; they get moved around during use. If you are sure it is around the bowl, remove the toilet as I have stated and inspect the wax seal, this is usually the culprit. Even if you think the seal looks good, replace it as the second time around they never seem to seal properly. Now is the time to inspect the floor

around the floor flange and if it is rotted out, your morning project just became a daylong task. You will have to remove the old flooring and replace it as the floor flange is commonly screwed to the wood floor and this keeps the toilet in place. Provided your floor is sound, go to your local plumbing supply or Building Centre and purchase a new wax seal. The better model is the one with the plastic sleeve inside the wax ring. Carefully clean out all of the old wax ring and position the new one on the floor flange and give it an even pressure to hold it in place. Replace the "T" bolts and then carefully place the toilet bowl over the bolts and press down firmly. Now carefully tighten the bolts, you can crack the bowl so be cautious. I have found that it is better to separate the tank and bowl to do this, a toilet is heavy and generally the working room is tight. Check all your joints and reattach the water line and provided you have not developed any leaks in your connections this should fix the problem!

And now the answer to last weeks "Trivia about Homes" question. The answer is C) Low rise or Condominium Apartments. This weeks trivia question is " One of the most famous screws in the world was invented by a Canadian, was it A) Phillips B) Slot C) Quadrex D) Robertson. The answer in next week's column.

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