

Protecting Plumbing During a Winter Storm

CARE OF UTILITIES AND APPLIANCES WHEN THE POWER IS OUT

If the heat will be off in your home for several days during a winter storm, you should protect exposed plumbing, sewage systems and appliances from freezing and subsequent damage. Frozen pipes could become a problem once the temperature inside the home falls below 40 degrees F.

If some pipes have frozen, despite the fact that power has returned or exists, there are some simple measures to take. But whenever possible, get an expert for plumbing work or repairs.

REDUCE THE CHANCE OF FROZEN PIPES

Follow these steps to reduce the chance of pipes freezing during a power failure:

- ◆ Shut off the water at the main valve, or turn off the well pump if it is in the house.
- ◆ Turn the water heater off. An explosion could result if the heater is left on without water in the system. You will find either an electrical switch or gas valve for shutting off the appliance.
- ◆ Open all the faucets on the lower level, then the upper level. You may want to collect the water for household use.
- ◆ Insulate undrainable pipes around their main valves. Use newspaper, blankets or housing insulation.

Unlike summer homes and cottages, modern housing is not usually designed for easy winterization. For this reason, you should contact a plumber or other expert if the house will be without heat for an extended period of time. Critical measures include: draining of toilets, water softening units, drain traps, sump pumps, heaters, humidifiers, dishwashers and other appliances that use water.

WHEN PIPES FREEZE

Under normal circumstances, most of us never have to worry about a frozen water pipe. Our plumbing pipes are on interior walls and are insulated well enough that water does not freeze. But frozen pipes may become a concern if the heat is off or if water pipes run through unheated crawl spaces, floors over garages or in outside walls.

If pipes do freeze:

- ◆ Shut off the water supply and open faucets to the frozen pipes;
- ◆ Warm them with a heat lamp, blow dryer or portable heater;
- ◆ Do not use boiling water, propane torches or any open flame to thaw frozen pipes;
- ◆ Apply only moderate heat and expect to wait for several hours;
- ◆ Open sink cabinets to let in warm air.

If pipes have burst before you could take preventive action, immediately turn off their water supply. Try to locate the areas that need repair and call a plumber.

LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

The long-term solution for frozen pipes is to provide adequate insulation and heat. Methods may include wrapping pipes with insulation material and installing weather stripping, insulation and heat to the room. A temporary or last resort solution is the use of electric heating tape, which can be wrapped around the pipes and energized when sub-zero weather is predicted. You can also leave faucets connected to exposed pipes trickling when low temperatures are forecasted. If the pipes are under an enclosed sink, open the door and use a fan to blow warm air from the room toward the pipes.

Additional resources:

Your county family living agent