

50plus Handyman



Fixing drips and changing your taps

50plus Handyman director Roger Runswick looks at repairing and changing taps and offers hints about what to choose and why.

Fixing those drips!

Dripping taps are a common phenomenon. Although most people associate drips with washer problems they are often a result of erosion of the valve seat, a common occurrence if a tap has been left to drip for a lengthy period in a hard water area. Cold water taps fed directly from the mains are at particular risk. The pressure of the water forces it under the washer and little by little the brass from which the seat is cast is eroded. This results in tiny 'canals' forming in the seat, which allows water to pass under the washer and out through the tap.

Washers deteriorate over time, often tending to harden. If a tap is becoming increasingly difficult to turn off then a washer change is the first action. If this fails to cure the drips then the tap seat has almost certainly eroded. This does not necessarily mean a new tap is needed. A simple tool for grinding down the seat of the tap is readily available. This removes the canals and enables the washer to sit evenly on the tap seat, resulting in a watertight seal.

If the erosion has gone too far a new tap may be needed. So let's consider some of the benefits of and pitfalls of changing out taps.

Changing Taps

Simple changes can often bring significant visual and practical improvements to a home. Changing taps is one of them but before stepping out to snap up the latest bargain from your local DIY store give some thought to what you are trying to achieve and the process that will be involved.

For many people a tap change is simple and will be cheap. If the underside of the taps you wish to change is readily accessible, and the pipes feeding them are fitted with isolating valves (these are usually silver in colour and have a screw slot) then a pair of basin taps can often be changed in less than an hour. Conversely if there are no isolating valves then the cold water will need to be turned off at the stop cock or another point and the hot water at a gate valve. It is at this point that simple tap (or even washer) changes can start to turn into costly sagas. I have written previously about ensuring that stop cocks and gate valves are kept operational. If they are not then your friendly plumber is going to tell you that a little more than just a tap is going to have to be changed!

A point to be aware of is that bath taps can be difficult to replace. Access is often the major issue. It is not uncommon for taps to have been fitted on the bath before installing the bath. This is because the taps are frequently in a small gap between the end of the bath and the bathroom wall, leaving limited room for access. In smaller bathrooms basins are sometimes fitted adjacent to the bath meaning your plumber has to turn into a contortionist to get to the nuts holding the taps in place. And if you are installing laminate flooring in your bathroom and have a solid bath panel, do remember not to build the floor up to it so the panel can't be removed without taking the floor up. Remove the bath panel, fit the floor under the side of the bath and then trim the panel to fit.

Finally a few tips on choosing new taps. Firstly check that they will fit. Taps for basins and sinks normally have a 1/2in diameter inlet that fits into a 15mm pipe. Bath taps typically have a 3/4in diameter inlet that fits a 22mm pipe.

If you are buying for durability also consider a ceramic disc valve. These replace the traditional rubber washer with two hard-wearing ceramic discs, one fixed, one moving. When the tap is turned on, holes in the discs line up so water can flow through. The discs become smoother and more watertight with wear, so, in theory they never need renewing. The most durable external finish is chrome on brass.

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