

Cold Weather-Related Plumbing and Heating Emergencies

The following information from the Chartered Institute of Plumbing and Heating Engineering (CIPHE) can be used in printed, digital, and social communications to help consumers deal with common plumbing and heating issues. Emphasis should always be to employ a professional, appropriately registered professional to rectify plumbing and heating problems.

The below information is free to use but please credit the Chartered Institute of Plumbing and Heating Engineering (CIPHE).

Frozen Pipes

Cause:

- When the temperatures drop below freezing, the water within exposed / uninsulated pipework can freeze.

Potential issues:

- If parts of your plumbing or heating systems become frozen, it will block the flow of water.
- In plumbing systems this can limit water supplies to taps, showers and toilet cisterns.
- In heating systems this can limit water supplies to your boiler or heat source.
- As water expands when frozen, this can lead to damaged pipework, burst pipes and substantial leaks.

Solution:

- If a pipe freezes, turn off the mains water supply at the stop-valve - often sited under the kitchen sink.
- If there is not an internal valve, turn off the water at the external valve - often found under a cover in your garden or path.
- If the frozen pipe runs from a storage cistern and is not controlled by a valve, check that it has not split.
- If it has split, empty the cold-water storage cistern by opening the cold water on the bath, shower and taps - then call a professional plumber.
- If the pipe is not split, thaw it out by applying hot water bottles.
- Always start thawing a pipe at the end nearest the tap.
- Don't try to thaw the pipe too quickly as there may be splits in the pipe which are not immediately noticeable.
- If any part of the hot water system is frozen, there could be a risk of explosion if the boiler (or other heat source) is kept alight, so ensure it is turned off, or for solid fuel systems, extinguish the fire.
- Be careful as, although water may be flowing from taps, other parts of the system may still be frozen.
- Never use a naked flame to thaw a pipe.

If you have a frozen pipe and would rather seek the help of a professional, you can find a plumbing and heating system professional:

- Online at www.ciphe.org.uk
- By phoning 01708 472791
- By emailing info@ciphe.org.uk

Cold Weather Tips

- In very cold weather take special care to prevent water pipes becoming frozen by ensuring that all exposed pipes and storage systems are properly insulated, particularly in the roof space or attic.
- If your pipes could do with a bit of thermal help, take a quick trip down to your local plumbing or DIY merchant for some lagging. It is cheap, easy to fit and something you can do yourself.
- Make sure you know the location of, and have labelled, the stop-valve on the incoming water supply main.
- If you are going away on a winter's holiday, leave the thermostat set low (at least 5°C) to help prevent pipes from freezing; and do check your insurance policy to see if you must comply with any directives such as draining down pipework.
- If you need to call in professional help, make sure you engage the services of a member of the CIPHE. They have been vetted for qualifications and experience by the Industry's Chartered Professional body and abide by a Code of Professional Standards. You can find one online at www.ciphe.org.uk by phoning 01708 472791 or emailing info@ciphe.org.uk.

Quotes

Kevin Wellman, CEO, CIPHE

"The elderly are more likely to have older heating and plumbing systems in their home, which makes them more prone to breakdowns and cold weather-related issues. We would always urge people to keep an eye on elderly or vulnerable family members and neighbours when the cold weather comes, and to help ensure systems are well maintained."

"If you need to call in a professional it is important for householders to choose someone who will carry out work, professionally, competently and responsibly. Rogue installers may promise to do the job cheaper, but in the long run it could prove to be very expensive if the work is non-compliant and remedial work is necessary."

Jerry Whiteley, Technical Manager, CIPHE

"Frozen pipes cause problems on two levels. Firstly, if your pipe is frozen you cannot access water. Secondly, frozen pipes can cause considerable damage to your plumbing systems; when the ice thaws you may find you have sprung a leak or two where the ice has expanded in the pipe."

"In a cold snap it is prudent to check the small print on your house insurance policy, especially if you are leaving your home unoccupied for a holiday or work trip away. Some will demand that you take precautions to reduce the risk of frozen pipes such as leaving the heating on a low level. There will be those who are now struggling as their insurance company may not be willing to pay out."

Burst Pipes

Cause:

- When the temperatures drop below freezing, water within exposed / uninsulated pipework can freeze. As water expands when frozen, this can damage pipework, causing it to split.

Potential issues:

- Burst pipes leak and can cause substantial damage to both buildings and contents.
- Burst pipes can limit water supplies to taps, showers and toilet cisterns.
- Burst pipes can limit water supplies to your boiler or heat source.

Solution:

- Don't Panic! Prevent water passing the point of the leak by turning off the stop-valve on the incoming water supply main - often sited under the kitchen sink.
- If there is not an internal valve, turn off the water at the external valve - often found under a cover in your garden or path.
- If the escaping water cannot be controlled immediately, open all COLD water taps and flush the WC so that the pipework and storage system drains quickly.
- DO NOT TURN ON HOT TAPS.
- Turn off the central heating system and, if it uses a solid fuel boiler, allow the fire to die out. Switch off any electric immersion heater, then call a professional plumber.
- You can find a professional plumber online at www.ciphe.org.uk, by phoning 01708 472791 or emailing info@ciphe.org.uk.

Burst Pipe Tips:

- Make sure you know the location of, and have labelled, the stop-valve on the incoming water supply main. The ability to turn this off quickly could save thousands of pounds worth of damage in the case of a burst pipe.
- In very cold weather take special care to prevent water pipes becoming frozen by ensuring that all exposed pipes and storage systems are properly insulated, particularly in the roof space or attic.
- If your pipes could do with a bit of thermal help, take a quick trip down to your local plumbing or DIY merchant for some lagging. It is cheap, easy to fit and something you can do yourself.
- If you are going away on a winter's holiday, leave the thermostat set low (at least 5°C) to help prevent pipes from freezing; and do check your insurance policy to see if you must comply with any directives such as draining down pipework.
- Make sure your plumber is a member of the CIPHE. They have been vetted for qualifications and experience by the Industry's Chartered Professional body and abide by a Code of Professional Standards. You can find one online at www.ciphe.org.uk by phoning 01708 472791 or emailing info@ciphe.org.uk.

Quotes

Kevin Wellman, CEO, CIPHE

"I would strongly urge families and friends of elderly or vulnerable people, to make sure they have their boilers serviced and their plumbing systems checked before the cold snap kicks in. Ideally, an annual health check similar to the concept of an MOT should be undertaken to help avert the risk of boiler break downs and frozen or burst pipes."

"Leaks from burst pipes can take thousands of pounds to rectify and many months to dry out. The damage caused can be comparable with a fire. Don't run the risk of frozen and burst pipes – ensure your plumbing systems are adequately insulated and maintained by a professional engineer."

Jerry Whiteley, Technical Manager, CIPHE

"If the worst should happen, the important thing is to stop water running past the point of the leak by turning off the water supply via the stop-valve; you'll then buy yourself time to call in a professional."

"It's very important that you check your home insurance policy to see if there are any caveats connected to leaving your property empty in the winter. Some insurance policies state that the water from the mains must be turned off at the stop-valve. If you ignore this and you have water damage through a burst pipe, it is unlikely that they will pay out in the case of a claim."

Boiler Breakdowns

Cause:

Boiler breakdowns in exceptionally cold weather can be due to several reasons, hence you should always consult with a professionally registered expert. The below list covers the most frequent cold weather-related issues:

- When the temperatures drop below freezing, the condensate pipe on condensing boilers may freeze. This will cause the boiler to shut down.
- Burst and frozen pipes can also cause a boiler to malfunction (see above).
- Boilers that have not been regularly maintained are more likely to breakdown.

Potential issues:

- Loss of heating
- Loss of hot water
- In rare cases, explosion, or the risk of Carbon Monoxide (CO) poisoning.

Solution:

- Always have your boiler regularly maintained – the CIPHE recommends annual servicing.
- Annual servicing not only makes boilers less prone to breakdown, but it also ensures systems are working efficiently (saving you money) and safely (potentially saving your life).

- If your boiler breaks down, you will need the services of a professional. Do not risk employing a cowboy. Heating systems are dangerous in an amateur's hands.
- You need to choose a specialist with the correct accreditations:
- If your boiler is gas fired, you will need someone who is GasSafe registered: <https://www.gassaferegister.co.uk/>
- If your boiler is oil fired, you will need an OFTEC registered professional: <https://www.oftec.org.uk/>
- If you use a biomass or solid fuel boiler, you will need to ensure they are HETAS registered: <https://www.hetas.co.uk/>
- You can find CIPHE members who hold these accreditations:
 - Online at www.ciphe.org.uk
 - By phoning 01708 472791
 - By emailing info@ciphe.org.uk.
- If the breakdown is due to a frozen condensate pipe, and your professional is familiar with your system, they may be able to talk you through defrosting the condensate pipe over the phone.
- You should only ever attempt defrosting condensate pipes that are at ground level and if you feel confident to do so. If your condensate pipe is higher, or you are unsure, call in the services of a professional heating specialist.

Boiler Breakdown Tips

- If your condensing boiler stops working during minus temperatures regularly, it could be that you need some remedial work to your condensate pipe. Make sure you get the necessary advice from your professional installer on how this can be prevented from recurring in future.
- Annual servicing is cheaper and more convenient than an emergency breakdown. Ensure you have your heating and plumbing systems maintained before you hit winter each year.
- Annual servicing also makes you a regular customer. Busy professionals will be more likely to drop everything to help you in an emergency should you be a regular customer.
- If you need to call in professional help, make sure your plumbing and heating industry specialist has the relevant accreditations to work on your system and is a member of the CIPHE. All members are vetted for qualifications and experience by the Industry's only Chartered Professional body and abide by a Code of Professional Standards.
- You can find an engineer online at www.ciphe.org.uk by phoning 01708 472791 or emailing info@ciphe.org.uk.

Quotes

Kevin Wellman, CEO, CIPHE

"Heating systems that have been turned off all spring and summer may need some TLC to ensure they work effectively and efficiently all winter long. Freezing temperature can take many by surprise, so this year be one step ahead by ensuring your heating systems are correctly serviced and maintained."

"It should be remembered that cost of malfunctioning heating systems can be far more than financial. A boiler breakdown during harsh weather can put the elderly at considerable risk of hyperthermia and other health conditions due to the cold. Unsafe boilers also bring the hidden danger of carbon monoxide poisoning or - in rare cases - the risk of explosion. It really is not worth

taking any risks with heating appliances. Always employ a professional, registered engineer to undertake any works."

Jerry Whiteley, Technical Manager, CIPHE

"Everyone assumes their heating system is in good working order, but most people haven't used it for many months. It may work, but is it safe? Is your pipework appropriately lagged to avoid frozen and burst pipes? Is your condensate pipe correctly installed and sited to avoid freezing? The boiler may be the heart of your heating system, but the rest of the components need checking too - cylinders, thermostats, filters, pumps, radiators and pipework are all vital to providing heating and hot water in your home."

"Don't ignore little niggles with your boiler or hot water system. If something is not working properly, get it fixed. Make sure you have your systems serviced yearly to pick up on any small faults, before they turn into an expensive breakdown."

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