

# Toilet Trouble



Too late to take evasive action! My senior attorney turns the corner and spots me. “Ron, is that a toilet plunger you’re carrying? And a toilet snake? What’s going on?”

“It’s a long story” I reply evasively, “I heard a rumor that the TMPeople kingpins and their cronies were having a power lunch at the Roundhouse Café and were overheard discussing the creation of a TMPeople empire separate from the USPTO. Salaries for writers in the high two figures were being thrown around. This was my big break!

“After handing my letter of resignation in to my group director, I ran down to find a TMPeople kingpin to begin negotiations. That’s when I found out that the TMPeople bank account had been cleaned out by the Roundhouse lunch, so the whole idea was forgotten. I

went back upstairs to grovel for my job. It was given back to me on the condition that I accept a new Building Maintenance element in my PAP. And I was informed that there is a clogged toilet in the fifth-floor men’s room.”

Tracy put her hand to her face and took a moment to contemplate all this, the unfairness of life, and her place in the universe. “But what do you know about toilets?” was all she could bring herself say. Well, turns out I do know a few things.

If your toilet has trouble emptying, there are two possibilities, both icky. If the water in the bowl rises very high when you flush, or even overflows, then something is stuck in there. That means you need a plunger or a snake, or a plumber depending on your tolerance for ickiness. If the clog is not too terrible, the plunger may work. A toilet snake, about \$15 at Lowe’s Ace Sears Depot, will unclog anything up to about six feet into the drain. If that isn’t long enough, you can buy longer snakes. But do you want to? At that point you might want to pull out a C-note and call the plumber.

If the water in the bowl spins around lazily and partially empties, but not completely, you may have a clog, or if your toilet is several years old you may have calcium deposits. When you flush a toilet, water from the tank flows through the toilet, and comes out in two places. Under the lip of the bowl are many





small holes where the water is forced out at an angle. This creates the familiar swirling action in the toilet bowl. No, it has nothing to do with which hemisphere you're in. At the same time, water is forced through a hole at the bottom of the bowl called the flush jet. This hole is about as big around as your finger, and its job is to force the swirling water down the drain.

As toilets age, they can develop calcium deposits that slow down the flow of water through these holes. To clean them out, you must first don the hazmat suit and clean the toilet bowl like it's never been cleaned before. That's right—up under the lip and everything.

Then, clean out the flush jet. You do this by breaking up and scraping off the calcium deposits in the flush jet using a screwdriver, ice pick, or whatever you have around the house. Get your implement of destruction up into the jet all the way to the back and scrape hard. Those deposits are tough. Keep at it

and get every little bit you can out of there. When you've cleaned the jet out as well as you can, you need to poke a stiff wire (like a cleverly bent piece of coat hanger) or an ice pick into the holes up under the lip of the toilet breaking up and cleaning out any calcium deposits up there. You'll probably find one or two that are completely clogged. Push harder, you'll get them. I used a little mirror I found in one of my wife's make-up compacts to see the holes up under the lip. Don't tell her.

White vinegar can loosen calcium deposits as can various chemicals you can buy, but you have to figure out how to keep the vinegar or chemicals in contact with the deposits for a day or so. I can't help you there, I've never tried it. The screwdriver and



coat hanger method has always worked for me.

If your toilet runs excessively, either the flapper or the shut off valve needs to be replaced. Fortunately, replacing either one is simple and inexpensive.

If the toilet runs for a few seconds, then stops for a while, then runs again, then stops, then runs again, the problem is your flapper. Happily, this is amazingly easy and inexpensive to fix. The flapper is a large black, brown, or red rubber seal at the bottom of the inside of the



toilet tank. It is connected by a chain or strip of plastic to the handle that you use to flush the toilet. When you flush the toilet the flapper, well, flaps open allowing water to drain into the toilet bowl. Due to years of being submerged in water, it can become distorted. If it is distorted, it loses its seal, and allows water to leak out of the tank into the bowl. When the water level drops a couple of inches in the tank, the valve notices, opens, and allows more water into the tank. This is the periodic “running” sound you hear.

To replace the flapper, first run down to Lowe’s Ace Sears Depot and buy a new one. A new flapper should cost between \$1.50 and \$3, and it usually comes with a new chain. When you get home and back in the bathroom, turn off the water where it enters at the wall by turning the oval shaped water supply handle clockwise as far as it will go. Then flush the toilet to empty the tank.

There are two ways the flapper may be attached to your toilet. Most likely, the flapper will be attached to two “ears” at the bottom of the overflow tube. The overflow tube is a plastic tube about an inch in diameter and eight- or nine-inches long in the center of the tank. Just pull the old flapper off each ear, then disconnect the chain at the handle and put the new flapper and chain on the same way. No tools needed! Some older installations require that a collar be slipped over the overflow tube. This necessitates first sliding or cutting off the old collar. Either way, it’s pretty simple and obvious.

If the toilet just runs and runs with no break, you need a new shut-off valve. This is the tall brass or plastic thing inside your tank that connects to the water supply at the bottom of the tank. If you have an old style float valve (looks like a floating acorn squash on the end of a metal rod), you can try bending the float rod downward and this may fix it for a few months, but it’s just a matter of time before you must replace the valve.

A new brass valve and float will cost over \$30 and will last between four and eight years. A toilet repair kit containing a new plastic valve, new washers, nuts, and a new flapper costs around \$7 and will last about three or four years. You don’t need the flapper right now, but save it. You will. Any questions?

Shut off the water at the supply and flush. There will be about an inch of water at the bottom, so try and bail as much out as you can with a sponge. Place a towel under the tank where the water supply attaches. The water supply is attached to the underside of the tank with a nut about an inch in diameter. Unscrew this nut with an adjustable wrench and disconnect the water supply from the tank.

Now, unscrew the slightly larger nut that is flush against the underside of the tank and remove the old valve and washer from the tank. The purpose of the towels should now be clear.

There will be a marking on your new valve indicating the critical water level, sometimes marked CL. The height of the valve, when installed in the tank, from its base to the CL mark should be the height of the overflow tube plus one inch. Adjust the height of the new fill valve by holding the base and twisting the top. If this results in the valve being so tall that you cannot put the top on the tank without it hitting the valve, you’ll have to cut an inch or so off of the overflow tube with a small saw or utility knife, and then re-adjust the valve.

Clean the tank around the hole where the valve will go. Put a new washer on the threaded end of the valve, insert it into the hole in the tank, and secure it to the tank with the new large nut. Next, attach the water supply to the new valve using the new rubber washer supplied in the kit. Be sure both of these nuts are nice and snug or else water will leak out and you will have to do this all over again. Pay particular attention to the water supply nut.

Now, push the little rubber overflow hose onto the nipple on the valve and attach the other end to the overflow tube using the enclosed clip. You will probably have to shorten the hose with a pair of scissors so that it does not kink when attached to the overflow tube. If you forget to install this hose, or it falls off, a geyser of water will shoot to the ceiling when someone flushes. Hilarious!

Crank everything down nice and tight, cross your fingers for luck, and then turn on the water supply. Check very carefully for leaks at the toilet tank. If you see a drip or two, turn off the water, take everything apart, dry it off, and put it all back together being more careful this time.

I want to thank everyone for the many A Hammer & A Nail topic suggestions I’ve received as well the interesting suggestions as to alternative uses for my time. Keep ‘em coming! **TM**