



Highlights: Plumbers

There's nothing like a plumbing issue to leave you (and your wallet) feeling drained. The good news is that there are easy ways to prevent many common plumbing problems, and when you need a professional, there are some very good choices in the area. *Bay Area Consumers' Checkbook*, online at www.checkbook.org, rated local plumbers for service quality and price, identifying many that will do top-notch work at a low price. Highlights from Checkbook's report include:

Plumbing Do's and Don'ts

- Make sure you and anyone who lives with you knows where to find water shut-off valves and how to use them. If a pipe bursts, quickly stopping the flow of water can save you from extensive damage.
- Periodically check shutoff valves, exposed pipes, faucets, and your hot water heater for leaks. If you find one, have it repaired immediately.
- Dispose of grease in the trash—never pour it down the drain.
- Be careful about what you put in your garbage disposal. Many models can become clogged if you dispose of coffee grounds, uncooked rice, and more. Run the water while the disposal is in use.
- Cover bathtub and shower drains with screens to prevent hair from clogging pipes.
- If a drain is completely clogged, do not use a drain cleaner. It will likely produce a large pool of highly caustic water.
- During winter, do not completely shut off your heating system if you will be away. Keep it at 55 degrees to keep pipes from freezing.
- Be careful what you flush down the toilet. Diapers, paper towels, feminine products, cat litter, and other items can clog up the works.
- Periodically check the temperature on your water heater. Most models should be set between 120 and 140 degrees to save energy costs and extend the appliance's life.

Price and Quality

- Some of the plumbing companies Checkbook evaluated were rated "superior" overall by 90 percent or more of their surveyed customers. But other companies received such favorable ratings from fewer than half of their surveyed customers.
- Plumbers vary not only in quality of service, but also in price. Here are some examples of what Checkbook's undercover price shoppers found when shopping for the exact same jobs:
 - To supply and install an American Standard Cadet Pro Right Height toilet, prices ranged from \$350 to \$1,070.
 - The price to supply and install an InsinkErator Pro Series 750 garbage disposer ranged from \$310 to \$850.
 - The price to supply and install a Bradford-White water heater (model URG150T6N-394) ranged from \$1,014 to \$1,920.
- Checkbook found no relationship between quality and price—some of the lowest cost plumbing companies rated very high for quality.
- Always get multiple bids for installation and remodeling jobs. You could save thousands of dollars by getting just a handful of quotes.

Dealing With a Plumber on a Repair Job

- Before having a plumber out for a service call, explain exactly what problem you are experiencing. This will help the plumber bring the needed tools and parts and avoid extra trips.
- During the initial phone call, ask the plumbing company to explain how it figures its labor rates—what the minimum charge is, how much is included in the minimum, what time intervals are used to calculate charges (10 minutes, 15 minutes, half hour), and the charge per time unit.

- Review these rates when the plumber arrives.
- If you need to know exactly when a plumber will arrive, try to schedule the first service call of the day.
- Clear the area. You don't want to pay \$150 an hour for the plumber to remove junk from underneath your sink.

Dealing With a Plumber on a Remodeling Job

- Get a fixed-price contract. A fixed price will protect you against a surprisingly high bill after the job is complete.
- Specify in advance exactly what you want done—makes and model numbers of all fixtures and appliances; what kind of pipe will be used; exactly where fixtures are to be located; and who is responsible for—
 - Breaking up the floor,
 - Cutting holes in the wall,
 - Patching floor and walls,
 - Doing the carpentry, and
 - Hauling away the debris.
- Negotiate the best possible warranty—not less than one year on both materials and workmanship.
- For leverage and protection against default, arrange to hold back as much as possible of the price until the work is complete.
- If possible, pay by credit card. If you are dissatisfied, you can dispute the charge with your credit card company.

Checkbook's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or jlettis@checkbook.org to schedule.

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