

Protect your home in winter



Important!

Your safety and welfare come first.

If you perceive a risk in following any of the tips suggested here, we urge you to seek the help of a professional. That's especially true for tree, ice, and snow removal, which may present falling, exposure, or overexertion hazards.

Prevent frozen pipes

Water in pipes can freeze and expand during cold weather. If pipes expand too much, they can burst, causing damage to your home and belongings.

Use insulation (available at hardware and plumbing stores) to wrap any exposed pipes in the garage and unheated places in the home such as the attic, crawl spaces, outside walls, and the laundry room. If the pipes are near a power source, use UL-approved heating cable or tape and follow installation instructions.

Moving water is less likely to freeze. During cold snaps, leave one faucet on with a slow drip of cold water, particularly overnight. Choose the faucet farthest away from where the water enters your home to keep it moving through the entire house. Turn off and drain outdoor faucets, disconnect hoses, and wrap the faucets.

For vacant, unheated buildings, turn off the main shutoff valve, the water heater, and other appliances that use water. Open indoor and outdoor faucets to drain pipes, drain irrigation systems, and flush the toilet to drain the tank (it's OK to have water in the toilet bowl).

If you have a sink against an exterior wall, open the cabinet doors beneath the sink to circulate warm air around the pipes. If you're going to be away for several days, leave your heat on high enough to keep your pipes from freezing.

Thawing frozen pipes

Thaw frozen pipes *gradually* as soon as they're discovered. Always assume the pipe might be broken, and shut off the main water valve (usually in the garage or near where the water enters the house). If you're confident in your home-repair skills, you might try these steps. If not, call a plumber.

To find the frozen spot in a pipe, always start with the closest exposed pipe to the blocked faucet. Open that faucet. Wrap rags around the pipe and pour a little hot water over it until water flows again. Or – using extreme caution to avoid electric shock if the pipe bursts – gradually warm the pipe with a hairdryer, heat

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tape, heating pad, or space heater. As soon as water flows (which it might if there's residual water pressure), reopen the main shutoff valve. Be careful not to drain the hot water tank and leave it empty.

Never thaw pipes with an open flame, which creates fire danger. Plus, an open flame can heat a pipe too quickly, weakening it.

If extremely cold wind blows through air vents under your house, tack cardboard over them temporarily. That will help prevent pipes from freezing. Remove it to prevent moisture problems when the weather warms up.

Natural gas

Remove snow from around the gas meter. Allow plenty of clearance for drifting or melting snow.

Fire safety

Do not use your oven to heat your home.

When burning candles, use noncombustible holders with broad bases. Don't leave candles burning when you're away.

Make sure your fire alarm is working and keep an ABC multipurpose fire extinguisher on hand.

If the power goes out, turn off and unplug electrical appliances to avoid the surge that usually accompanies power coming back on.

Snowstorms

Heavy snow can cause structural damage to your roof and framing members. The weight of snow varies, depending on its water content. Your roof's slope and the size of framing members also determine how much weight they can bear.

Roof overload may be present if:

- Your roof looks swayed
- Windows or doors stick or pop open, or
- You hear creaking, cracking, or popping sounds.

If you think there might be a problem, we urge you to call a snow-removal service. We don't recommend getting on your roof when snow or ice is present.

In addition:

- Shake snow off tree branches that threaten to break under the extra weight.
- Don't use lawn fertilizer to melt stubborn spots on walkways – it can stain concrete and harm lakes and streams. Instead, use environmentally friendly ice melter, such as the type made from organic corn derivatives.
- Clear snow and leaves from storm drains to prevent flooding.
- Raise everything several inches off your basement floor in case water from melting snow seeps in.
- Before the storm is due to hit, cut dead or rotting tree branches to prevent them from falling on your house or car.

Power outages

Call your local utility, but don't tie up the line by calling more than once. Shut off all appliances except the refrigerator, freezer, and one light, which will let you know when electricity returns. If you had the range or oven on, turn it off. Turn off and unplug any televisions, computers, and other sensitive electronics that aren't plugged into a surge protector.

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To help stay warm:

- Keep curtains and shades closed to retain heat.
- Use hot water sparingly. Most hot water tanks will retain heat for three days.
- Roll a rug or towel and place it against the bottom edges of exterior doors.
- Close the fireplace damper and cover the opening if it's not being used.
- Close off rooms not being used. Avoid unnecessarily opening doors and windows.

To preserve food in your refrigerator:

- Keep your refrigerator door closed as much as possible. Food in unopened refrigerators should keep about eight hours, staying 45 to 50 degrees.
- If the power outage lasts longer than eight hours, throw out anything with an "off" odor.
- All unspoiled meat, fish, and poultry should be cooked and frozen for later use.
- If you think the power will be out for several days, pack ice inside the refrigerator's crisper compartments. Place towels in the bottom to catch dripping water.

To preserve frozen food:

- Keep the freezer door closed. If you do, contents shouldn't begin to thaw for 48 hours.
- After 48 hours, add dry ice. If the interior temperature is less than 40 degrees when the power comes on, it's safe to refreeze the food.
- Thawed, uncooked foods that are still cold (40 to 50 degrees) should be cooked and refrozen.
- Throw away vegetables and casseroles containing meat, eggs, cheese, and cream sauce even if they're still cold.
- Throw away any warm food. If potentially hazardous foods are thawed but still cold or have ice crystals, eat them as soon as possible. Don't refreeze them.

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