

Emergencies: Over-flowing Toilet Bowl

Watching water rise to the top edge of a toilet bowl is disconcerting to say the least. But in most cases the water will stop running before overflowing. Many toilet bowls are designed in such a way that they will usually hold the entire contents of the tank without overflowing. But that's only IF the water level in the bowl was at its normal height before the toilet was flushed, and the ballcock and flapper are working properly and shut off when the tank is full.

Unfortunately, when a toilet bowl is clogged and the water level rises and doesn't flush the contents away, some people are too hasty and will flush the toilet again hoping the additional water will 'push' the contents of the bowl down. This only causes a toilet bowl to overflow. SO, warn all members of your household, that when the water level in a toilet bowl is higher than normal - DO NOT FLUSH IT AGAIN. You must wait until the water level drops to normal. If it doesn't drop to normal, then you need to find out what is blocking the bowl. But under no circumstances should you flush again.

An overflowing toilet bowl can result in widespread and rather serious consequences. For example, not long ago, the McPherson Square Metro Station in Washington, D.C. lost power for much of the morning after a toilet overflowed in the nearby Lafayette Building, flooding a pair of Potomac Electric Power Co. feeder boxes that provide service to the subway stop, the building above and the U.S. Treasury Annex, according to the Potomac Edison Power Company spokeswoman. (The Washington Post, Thursday, November 26, 1998; Page D03)

QUICK ... Turn the Water Off!

When confronted with a bowl that is overflowing, quickly turn the water off under the tank. If you don't have a shutoff under the tank, or it's frozen, remove the tank lid and lift up on the float ball or cup. Then have someone else turn the water off at the main shutoff. (This assumes the problem is a clog in the toilet. If the problem is a backing up sewer then turning the water off isn't going to help. With the exception of a floor drain and not all houses have one, a toilet on the lowest level of a house is often the lowest opening to the sewer, and the first place water backs up when there is a problem with tree roots in the street.)

Once the water is off, and calm is restored, take a survey of the family. Does anyone know what might be clogging the toilet bowl? Has anyone lost a toy? Or maybe a cucumber? any tooth brushes or combs missing? Where is the roller for the toilet paper? How about the top to the can of hair spray? Etc., etc. If you determine that something has been accidentally flushed away, have the person with the smallest hand put their hand inside a large plastic trash bag and try to retrieve the item with their finger tips. Not always possible, but worth a try. However, take note of the following story from Loleta, CA and don't force your hand too far into the hole.

"Loleta, CA.... A 41 year-old man was taken to the fire department after his right hand became stuck inside a toilet bowl. Fire personnel unbolted the toilet and took both man and toilet to a nearby fire station where he was eventually freed with the liberal application of WD-40 spray lubricant. Neither the man nor the water closet suffered injury. It was not revealed why the man had reached into the commode to begin with."

A Toilet Plunger

Next step is to try the plunger or force cap. There are plungers especially made for toilets; one has a cone on the bottom another has a bellows which allows for more air to be exerted on the clog. Position the plunger over the large hole in the bowl and push down. Bob the Plumber in Napa, California cautions that you should start slowly to use a plunger on a stopped up toilet, and gently start to build intensity. He says he learned this lesson the hard way a long time ago, and to ignore his advice is to risk a mess. Develop intensity by gradually pressing more forcefully and pulling back faster. Repeat this as many times as necessary to dislodge the clog. There's a new type of plunger that uses compressed air called the Jet Plunger as opposed to the type that uses manual energy. I would still suggest you follow Bob's advice and begin the process slowly. Plunging usually works, but if it doesn't then you can try a toilet auger.

A Toilet Auger

A toilet auger is a plumbing snake inside a protective tube that has a bent end. You pull the snake back into the tube as far as it will go then insert the end of the pipe in the large hole in the bowl. Next, turn the handle while pushing firmly on the snake. **DO NOT USE A REGULAR SNAKE IN A TOILET BOWL.** A regular snake will scratch and damage the bowl.

A Last Resort

A last resort method is to use an industrial strength Wet/Dry Shop Vac to attempt to vacuum the clog out of the bowl... (An idea sent in by a viewer)

(Bob, Canton, OH) I found your website searching the internet. I tried unsuccessfully to clear a clogged toilet with a plunger then a toilet auger. I read your suggestion of using a wet shop vac. I used a 12.5 hp shop vac. Your suggestion solved my problem. Thank you for sharing ideas from do-it-yourselfers.

(Jim, Little Silver, NJ) Hi, Your suggestion using my wet/dry vac saved me from a big job of unclogging a bloated bar of soap.

(Peter) Thanks for the info on your site. It was very helpful in fixing my clogged toilet. A 4 inch plastic tube of makeup fell in the toilet and I took the steps outlined on your web page. However, after unsuccessfully using the auger, I had an idea. I secured a treble fishhook to the end of the auger and was able to hook the tube and fish it out. I hope this helps someone else. Keep up the good work!

When you are not successful with the above, you have a few choices. Call a plumber, or remove the toilet so you can try to clear the clog from the bottom of the bowl. By the time you've reached this stage, you must remain calm and above all don't resort to the extreme measures of the father in the following story ...

"Los Angeles, CA. A man in the central area was arrested for negligent discharge of a weapon after shooting his toilet five times with a .38 caliber handgun. He claims that he just got pissed and had it up to here after being unable to dislodge a hairbrush his daughter had flushed earlier in the day. The man received a psychological evaluation and was released on personal recognizance. It is not known whether or not the toilet pressed charges."

Oh No! No Water!

There are few things in life we depend on more than our water supply. That realization becomes a reality during and after big storms and electrical blackouts. For people living or working in hi-rise building (condos, apartments, offices, etc.) when the lights go out so do the pumps that maintain the water pressure in those buildings unless there are backup power generators. A single family homes is no better off when the public water supply is interrupted by a water main break, and private well systems suffer from the same malady ... no electrify = no water.

Hundreds of residents of Montgomery County, Maryland have learned how vulnerable they are to aging water supply systems. A rash of water main breaks have made headlines in the local papers and television news programs. According to the Gazette Community News, "There have been 42 breaks and leaks in the WSSC's (local utility company) water network in May alone (2007).

Like iceburgs, the major part of the pressurized water pipes are out-of-sight and out-of-mind buried under roads, and many of these pipes are over 50 years old. As the pipes age and deteriorate they become susceptible to ruptures from the traffic bouncing along overhead. The ensuing floods buckle roadways, disrupt traffic, close down schools, fill basements with water, shutdown air conditioning systems in high-rise buildings, wash away gardens and lawns, leave bathrooms and kitchens without running water and leave a massive mess to cleanup.

After one pipe ruptured in Montgomery County, four homes were evacuated; one home had its basement fill with water to its ceiling. Weeks later two homes two of those home remained empty and condemned.

While few households can store a large enough supply of emergency water to keep the plumbing system operating at full speed, there are some steps that can be taken to minimize the hardships. First, keep a supply of bottled water in your home for drinking purposes. Then collect, wash thoroughly, and fill bleach jugs or 2-litre soda bottles with water for other purposes. Find an out-of-the-way place to store this emergency supply of water in the basement, garage, laundry room, etc. Then periodically, change the water. I use my supply to water plants and then refill so my supply is rotated, and the water isn't wasted.

Don't be Caught Flushless

When the possibility exists that your water supply may be cut off (i.e. in anticipation of a hurricane) remember you have one more flush for each toilet, but then that's it. So, to insure you are not left flushless, fill your bathtubs with water and put a large bucket next to each toilet in the house. One bucket of water dumped quickly into a toilet bowl should completely flush a toilet. If your bathtub drain leaks, smooth out a plastic grocery bag over the drain cover.