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Home Maintenance Guide

common sense solutions to every day domestic tasks

Aspect Maintenance exists to help you keep your most valuable asset - your home - in good working order. But in these economically challenged times, many people are keen to do more than just keep their fingers crossed and hope for the best when it comes to property maintenance.

That's where this guide comes in.

If you have:

- a blocked sink - we'll talk you through unblocking it
- a blown fuse - we'll show you how to reset the system
- blocked gutters - we'll tell you how to clear them safely
- no tools for the job - we'll give you a list of the bare essentials

The truth is that a little knowledge can help you determine when you need to call us, and when you can save money by doing something yourself.

We hope you find it useful. Good luck!

- Will Davies & Nick Bizley, founders



Nick Bizley



Will Davies

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Plumbing & Drainage

Introduction

Hot and cold running water, free-flowing sinks and basins, central heating, working toilets - and a system free of leaks, blockages and strange odours - we all of us take them for granted. But the plumbing system in your home is a hardworking one, and occasionally something will go wrong. You might need a plumber, in which case Aspect is only ever a phone call away. But you might just need to clear the U-bend, or use the plunger - straightforward, simple household tasks that you can do yourself without much difficulty. In this section we'll look at when you should take the plunge, and when you'll need to call Aspect.

General principles

Prevention is better than cure. Making an effort to ensure your drains don't get clogged is easier in the long run than trying to clear a stubborn blockage. Try to get into the habit of running hot water through the drains after you've done the washing up - and pour a cup of vinegar or soda crystals down the drains once a month to keep them flowing.

All year round, but particularly in Spring and Autumn, check that your outside gullies are clear of leaves and debris - so that water drains away easily.

Make sure you know where your main stopcock, and other key isolation valves are - and how to turn it off. That way if a pipe does burst you'll know how to shut off the water to the house, preventing further damage.

Quick Guide

- *Find the main stopcock and other key isolation valves.*
- *Run hot water down the sink after washing up, and pour vinegar or soda crystals down the drain once a month*
- *To avoid a blocked toilet - make sure you don't flush toilet fresheners, nappies, sanitary towels, cotton buds etc down it!*
- *If in doubt or danger call Aspect.*

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Plumbing & Drainage

In the kitchen

Plumbing issues in the kitchen tend to focus around the sink. The pipe from the kitchen sink gets clogged because dirty washing up water is full of grease and debris, which can collect and form a blockage. Using a simple steel strainer over the plughole can keep big pieces of debris from being washed down the pipe. Running hot water after you've done the washing up, and pouring a cup of vinegar down the pipe once a month will also help break up greasy deposits and keep the pipe flowing freely. Proprietary drain cleaners or soda crystals can also help shift a stubborn blockage. Sometimes solid objects will be washed down the sink accidentally, and in most kitchens the U-bend underneath the sink can be simply removed, cleared and washed, and put back in place with no more complicated equipment than a bucket and a wrench.

If you have a dishwasher, get into the habit of checking the salt and rinse aid regularly, and also clean the food trap at least once a week. Not only will this help to keep the dishwasher working efficiently it will also prevent bad odours from forming.

In the Bathroom

If the basin or bath is blocked, or draining slowly...

Bale out most (but not all) of the water with a bowl or jug. Hold a rag/cloth firmly over the overflow opening, and place a plunger over the drain hole. There needs to be enough water in the basin or bath to cover the head of the plunger. Pump the plunger up and down rapidly to clear the blockage. After clearing the blockage it's a good idea to clean out the trap.



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Plumbing & Drainage

Cleaning out a waste trap (or u-bend)
Bale out as much of the water as you can. The trap is below the sink or basin. Place a bowl underneath the trap to catch any water and unscrew the joints. Clean the trap thoroughly and replace it, checking that the seals are in place and that all the joints are screwed up tightly.

If more than one fitting is blocked
The problem may be in the soil stack or main drain. Blockages are usually caused by the build up of fat, soap scum and hair etc. Washing the wastes through with vinegar, or hot water and soda crystals, on a regular basis can help to stop blockages forming. But if you think the soil stack or main drain is blocked, call Aspect.

Clearing a blocked toilet

It's not lovely work, perhaps, but most toilets get blocked because something like a toilet freshener, nappy or other unusual object has been put down them. Put on some rubber gloves and have a go at clearing the blockage yourself...

If the pan is already full of water, remove some of it into a suitable container using a jug or bowl. Push a mop head attached to a handle, or a plunger to the bottom of the pan and pump up and down vigorously about 10 times. This creates a vacuum and pressure, which may shift the blockage. You may need to repeat the process several times before the toilet flushes normally. Do not use plungers with a metal disk, as these may chip or crack the toilet bowl. Best thing to do is avoid putting anything unusual down the toilet!

If the blockage won't clear
- call Aspect.



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Gas and Central Heating

Introduction

If your home is on a mains gas supply, and you have a gas fired central heating system, it will be worth your while to learn a few basic fixes for any faults with the heating that may occur. Obviously, if you can smell gas and you think there may be a leak, you must always put safety first: open windows and doors, don't smoke or use a naked flame, call the professionals.

It's important to know where in the house the gas comes in - so that if necessary you can switch it off. The main switch is likely to be next to the gas meter.

Any major work to the gas central heating system will need to be done by a professional, but there are a few straightforward tasks you can do, or check, yourself, before calling the gas engineer out. We're going to look at bleeding radiators, and controlling the central heating:

Bleeding Radiators

If the top part of a radiator is cold, it's likely that air is trapped in the system. Bleeding the radiator releases the trapped air in the radiator, allowing the hot water to fill the system.

You'll need a radiator key, which you can get from most DIY and hardware shops, a rag or cloth, and a bowl or bucket.

DO NOT BLEED the radiators if you have a combination (combi) boiler. Combi boilers run on a slightly different system - one which your gas engineer will be happy to explain to you. Once you know how to reset the water pressure in a combi system you can bleed the radiators yourself, if necessary.

Turn off the heating system before you bleed the radiators.

Quick Guide

- *If the top of the radiator is cold, it's worth bleeding it to release trapped air*
- *Find where to turn off the mains gas supply it could be vital in an emergency*
- *If you smell gas - open windows and doors immediately, and call the professionals.*
- *If in doubt or danger call Aspect.*

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Gas and Central Heating

The bleed valve is the small square nut at the top end of the radiator. Place the key over the valve and hold the cloth around it to catch any water. Gently turn the key anti-clockwise until you hear a hiss - this is the air being released. When water starts to come through turn the key back clockwise to shut the valve. **DO NOT** unscrew the valve completely as the plug will come right out.

Controlling your central heating

How to set a digital timer

Check the clock is showing the correct time. If not, put the timer switch to 'clock' and adjust the time using the 'forward' and 'reverse' buttons. Reset the timer switch to 'auto'. Set the 'heating' and 'hot water' switches to come on once, twice or stay on all the time ('constant') as you require. During freezing spells, keep the heating on all the time and turn the room thermostat down during the night and if you are out all day.

How to set a clock timer

Turn the clock until it is showing the correct time. Decide when you want the heating to come on and go off and set the pins or arrows for those times. Set the timer switch to 'timer' or 'auto' as appropriate.

How to control the temperature

To set the thermostat turn the dial so that the arrow or marker is against the temperature setting you want. A comfortable temperature is between 18°C and 22°C.

Heating not working?

Has the pilot light on the boiler gone out? Turn the heating and hot water onto 'constant' and check to see if the pilot light fires up. If not, check the instructions for the boiler as it is usually a straightforward task to re-light the pilot light.

If the heating is still not working, and you have bled the radiators
- call Aspect.



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Gas and Central Heating

Remember – with GAS

If you smell gas or believe that gas could be escaping make sure you open all windows and doors, turn off your gas supply at the meter control valve and ring National Grid Gas on their emergency hotline 0800 111 999.

Carbon monoxide is a silent killer, it is odourless, colourless and you can't taste it. It can be deadly and you can be particularly vulnerable if you sleep in a room with a faulty gas appliance. Some common symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning are: tiredness, nausea, headaches, drowsiness, chest pains and other flu like symptoms. To minimize the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning from your gas appliances make sure these are regularly serviced and properly installed. Carbon monoxide alarms can cost as little as £10 and offer second level protection against the dangers.

Check the colour of the flame, a steady blue flame is more likely to signal that an appliance is working as it should, but a yellowy or orange flame may indicate a blocked flue or a problem with the appliance. In this event shut the appliance down and seek advice from a registered engineer.



Never block or cover flues or vents, as this will cause a build up of carbon monoxide.

Beware of stains and soot on boilers, as this may indicate there is a fault.

If a pilot light keeps going out it is likely that the boiler is faulty.

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Electrical

Introduction

Any kind of major electrical fault around the house will need to be repaired by a professional electrician. That said, however, there are a few everyday electrical tasks that aren't complicated, or dangerous, and which you could attempt yourself. The most important thing to remember is to switch off and unplug whatever it is you need to work on, so there is no danger of a live current.

The first thing to do is find your main fuse box (these days called a consumer unit), which will be in the same place as your electricity meter. They are often in the main hallway of a house, in a purpose built cupboard. This is where the electricity in your house is controlled from, and it's important that you know where to go and what to do if you need to turn off the mains electricity. (It's also important to remember where you left the torch...)

In the case of loss of electric light or power. Your fuse box, or consumer unit, will either have fuses or trip switches. Modern electric circuits are fitted with a circuit breaker fuse system: if a fault develops, a switch is tripped and the circuit is broken. Older ones have fuse holders and when a fuse is blown it must be replaced or rewired. If you experience problems with an old-fashioned fuse box, it might be sensible to install a replacement which conforms to current regulations - for ease, safety and peace of mind. If in doubt, call Aspect.

Setting a trip switch

Open the cover on the consumer unit to see which switches have tripped to the OFF position. Put them back to the ON position.

If tripping occurs again

It is probably being caused by a faulty appliance. You need to identify which circuit is affected and which appliance on that circuit is causing the problem.

Quick Guide

- Find the main consumer unit - and how to turn it off
- Switch off and unplug electrical appliances before working on them
- Replace the fuse in a domestic plug with another of the same amperage
- If in doubt or danger call Aspect.

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Electrical

Which appliance is faulty?

Go around the house noting which set of lights or sockets are not working. Unplug all appliances on that problem circuit and switch off the immersion heater (if you have one). Switch the tripped switch to the ON position and plug in the appliances one by one until the trip goes again. Leave that appliance unplugged, and have it repaired by a professional electrician.

What causes it to trip or blow a fuse?

- An overloaded circuit
- Too many appliances being used at the same time
- A faulty or misused appliance
- Overfilled kettles
- Unclean toasters
- Cooker rings worn out or cracked
- Faulty immersion heaters
- Faulty connections on leads to appliances eg TV/Stereo etc.
- Light bulbs blowing

Plugs

Most plugs will have a fuse inside them. If the appliance suddenly stops working, it is worth replacing the fuse inside the plug before calling the electrician. To find out the correct type of fuse to fit in the plug, check the rating plate on the appliance. Do not overload plug sockets by using multiple plug adaptors.

Replacing the plug on an appliance is fairly straightforward, and is well worth doing before you declare your stereo/lamp/clock radio/television etc defunct.

DO NOT:

Tamper with the electricity company's fuse and seals
Take any action unless you are confident you can do it safely



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Roofing

Introduction

The roof is the part of the house most likely to be taken for granted, which is strange considering how important it is. Roofs and gutters take the heaviest battering through the Autumn and Winter, when high winds and heavy rain or snow can be daily occurrences. It makes considerable sense to check the general health and well-being of your roof and gutters in the spring and summer, when working outside isn't dangerous, and can even be pleasant!

Accessing your home's roof from the outside might not be something you feel you can do, but a couple of trips a year into the loft or attic space should be more possible. Checking for missing slates or tiles, and looking for signs of leaks is much easier (and cheaper) than dealing with a bulging ceiling or damp joists.

Start by taking a look at the roof from ground level. Slipped or disjointed tiles or slates can usually be spotted easily against the regular lines of the undisturbed covering. The colour of any newly exposed and unweathered slate will also pinpoint a fault. Look at the ridge against the sky to check for misalignment and gaps in the mortar joining. If you want to be really thorough, follow this with a closer inspection through binoculars, checking the state of the flashings at abutments and around the chimney. From inside an unlined roof you will be able to spot chinks of daylight that indicate breaks in the covering. Use a torch to check the roof timbers for water stains; they may show as dark or white streaks. If you see evidence of missing tiles or leaks - call Aspect as soon as possible.

Quick Guide

- *Check your roof at least once a year for missing slates or tiles and leaks.*
- *Keep your gutters clear - check in Spring and Autumn*
- *If in doubt or danger call Aspect.*

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Roofing

Guttering

Inspect and clean out gutters regularly. Gutters sometimes collect sand washed down from the tiles by the rain. This builds up quickly if the flow of water is restricted by leaves or twigs. Birds' nests can effectively block the guttering or downpipes, too. The weight of water standing in plastic guttering can distort it; and if a blockage causes a gutter to overflow, damp may penetrate the wall below.

Plastic guttering can also be badly distorted by the weight of snow and ice. If you can reach it safely, try dislodging the build-up with a broom from an upstairs window. If not - it might be worth calling the professionals.

If you find a blockage in a downpipe, don't push it down. Try to pull it up with a piece of hooked wire.



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Handyman/General Building

Introduction

When it comes to little fiddly jobs around the house it seems to be the case that some people are interested in having a go, and some are not. Luckily for the latter, at Aspect we're happy to do whatever you need us to do around the house - your property is our business. But it might be the case that you simply don't know where to begin, which is where this guide might come in useful. In this section we'll take a quick look at some of the most straightforward, everyday domestic tasks - and how to tackle them:

Basic Equipment:

If you're going to embark on even the simplest household task, you're going to need some tools. These will equip you for most things:

- one mid-size flat head screwdriver
- one mid-size cross head screwdriver
- one mid-weight claw hammer

- a small(ish) saw
- a pair of pliers
- a set of spanners
- a mid-size wrench

If you're thinking of hanging pictures or fixing cabinets etc to the walls, an electric drill and some rawl plugs will get you a nice firm fixing.

Putting up Flat-Pack furniture

One simple tip is to look at the instructions from beginning to end before you begin, as well as making sure you have all the necessary tools to hand. If you think the task through logically before you start - and if possible lay out the pieces in the right place - you might find the task a great deal easier.

Taping cracked glass

To make a temporary repair to cracked glass, you can use clear self-adhesive waterproofing tape. Clean the glass and apply the tape on the outside, over the crack. If you apply the tape promptly it will make an almost invisible repair.

Quick Guide

- *If you'd like to be handy round the house, get some basic equipment*
- *Get into good household habits, and keep your bills down in the process*
- *If in doubt or danger call Aspect.*

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Handyman/General Building

General Household Tasks.

If you do these simple tasks regularly, and make a habit of them, you will find not only that your house runs smoothly, but also that you'll need to replace your appliances less frequently, and all the while keeping your energy bills down!

Keep your tumble drier free of fluff. If it builds up fluff can cause a considerable fire hazard. Make it a habit to clear the fluff before or after every usage.

Descalc your kettle. Kettles are relatively cheap to replace, but if you descale it once a month you'll find you have to replace your kettle less often - and your tea will taste nicer!

Check your smoke detectors. If they're battery operated, check the batteries regularly and keep the detectors clean and free of dust.

Dust and clean your appliances. Dust and grime will eventually stop your appliances working properly. A monthly whisk round with the polish and a damp cloth will keep them clean - and your house looking sparkly.



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Refurbishments

Introduction

It can take months to completely refurbish a whole house, and is a skilled and testing job involving every element in this guide. Aspect offers a complete refurbishment service, at competitive rates. But if you're keen to keep your house looking in excellent condition, inside and out, it is, of course, possible for you to do quite a bit of it yourself - it's good old-fashioned DIY! If you really want to get stuck in, there are numerous DIY guides in the book-shops, and even some very useful videos on the Internet - but if you're just thinking about applying a new coat of paint, or hiding a couple of holes in the wall, here are a few tips to get you started...

Holes in the Wall?

To repair a few wall repairs use gypsum-based fillers like Tetrion or Polyfilla. For larger defects you might need to fill and sand several times to achieve the necessary finish. If the wall is badly damaged it will need to be professionally plastered.

For cracks along inside corners and between wall and any skirting, door cases, window sills etc, it is best to use decorators caulk, or mastic. Apply with a glue gun and smooth with your finger. If you dip your finger in warm soapy water you'll get a nice even finish.

Taking off wallpaper?

Stripping wallpaper is best done with a steamer. It will not damage the walls or create any more mess than any other method of stripping, is faster and saves you breathing the stripping solutions.



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Refurbishments

Ready to paint?

Choose the right brush - a pure bristle one is better for oil based paint, synthetic ones are better for emulsions. Unless you need to paint a very small patch, don't go for the cheapest brush - it makes painting a lot harder.

If the smell of fresh emulsion paint gets to you, cut an onion or a lemon in half and leave it in the room. It will take away most of the smell.

Before you start, wrap your roller tray in cling-film and just roll it up and throw it away afterwards.

Keep paint off the handles, hinges and locks by applying some Vaseline on a piece of tissue to them before you start painting. The paint won't stick to that.

Be sure to put masking tape round the edges of the windows and round the edges of the carpets to avoid getting paint on them.

Store leftover paint in glass jars - you'll get a better air-tight seal than a paint tin and as you will be able to see what colour the paint is, you won't waste time opening every paint tin in the house looking for the right colour.

If you're interested in refurbishing your house - re-decorating, building shelving or storage, all the way up to major renovations - call Aspect and talk to one of our specialists. Or see our website www.allaspectsltd.co.uk for more information.



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