

From coast to coast freezing cold weather makes frozen pipes a reality

By **Dan Howard**
for TRIB TOTAL MEDIA

Record cold temperatures have stretched across the country from one end, all the way to the other. We are just now hitting the first official weekend of winter and have already had “way too much” record breaking freezing weather.

Now, for those that have never had the experience of frozen pipes, you should be thankful for the lack of familiarity! You have missed out on a big mess usually accompanied by heartache and thousands of dollars in damage.

Power outages can turn the best furnace into a hunk of useless metal and your home into an oversized freezer. Newer furnaces are sized to barely keep up with heating a home as a way to save energy. They are not sized for unusually cold weather and the time between a furnace failing and pipes freezing can be very short. Crawl spaces and garage areas are at very high risk for freeze damage even when the furnace is operating at full potential.

A new or a well-insulated house is not a guarantee against frozen pipes if we have extreme cold, particularly if it is coupled with a high wind. Keep in mind that we do not get warning of extreme cold ahead of time making advance preparation the best defense. Even in a house that is well insulated, a hole in a wall, a loose board, or a missing piece of insulation in a wall can result in freezing pipes.

All of us have seen a plastic milk jug bulge when the milk has frozen. No force on earth can prevent water from expanding 10% when it freezes. If the expansion occurs in an enclosed area such as plumbing pipes, a hot water heating system, toilet bowl or sink drain trap, they will burst.

PREVENTION IS THE BEST PROTECTION FROM FROZEN PIPES

- Open faucets in areas that pipes have previously frozen. Warmer water from the water system moving through pipes will not freeze as fast as standing water.
- Disconnect your exterior garden hoses from outside spigots. Garden hoses hold water in the hose and the valve. The pipes connected to a hose will split with even a moderate freeze.
- Open the doors to vanities, kitchen sinks and other plumbing access panels. Plumbing near outside walls and over crawl spaces and garages is most likely to freeze. Adding warm room air to cold plumbing inside of sink and closet areas can only help.
- Cut access panels and cover with a door or vent in areas of plumbing that have previously been freezing problems. A grill installed into a wall to allow the convection of warm air can prevent freezing pipes.
- Add heat tapes covered with insulation to exposed pipes. The warmth of the tapes can prevent freezing. Place the heat tapes on a switch with a pilot light. Only turn on heat tapes in times of cold weather to extend the life of the tapes. Check the tapes for warmth every season because heat tapes only have a life expectancy of one to 5 year.
- Add insulation in the right areas. Look at both the objects you are insulating and the heat source. Do not place insulation between the heat source and the protected area. Improperly placed insulation resists the flow of heat from the inside of the home to the plumbing that is “past” the insulation.
- Purchase a simple thermometer to leave in garages or crawl spaces. For under \$25.00 you can purchase a thermometer that is designed with a remote sensor to tell you outside temperatures. Put the outside sensor in the area that may freeze in severe cold weather. Move it back outside for the rest of the year.



PRACTICAL STEPS YOU NEED TO KNOW WHEN YOUR PIPES FREEZE

If you have frozen pipes, do not leave the home unattended with the main water valve left on. Turn off the main valve for the house. Damaged frozen pipes do not leak until the ice that is plugging the pipe melts. When the ice melts, thousands of dollars of damage can occur in minutes.

If water is leaking through a ceiling or wall, drill a couple of holes through the plaster so that the water can run out without damaging the entire area. You would much rather empty a couple of buckets of water than to be filling a garbage can with wet plaster.

Seek professional help if you are over your head. Having the right equipment and knowledge could be a bargain as compared to the cost of losing precious belongings and having additional damage to the home. Hire a professional that will also tell you how to prevent the problem in the future.

UNDERSTANDING HOMEOWNERS INSURANCE AND FROZEN PIPES

Photograph and document the damage. It will make the insurance claims easier to process. It may also provide additional information that can be used to avoid the recurrence of the problem.

Promptly notify your insurance agent

of a claim. In times of severe cold, you will not be alone in having this problem and you will be better off at the front of the line to receive service than instead of the end.

Take reasonable action to minimize the claim. You have a duty to perform whatever is within your power to protect the property from additional damage.

Understand this important fact: Homeowners insurance is not required to make corrections to avoid recurrence of the claim. They will correct the damage, but not solve underlying problems. The homeowners that had gutter leak issues two years in a row learned that lesson the hard way.

Though you may take solace in the fact that the damage is covered by homeowners insurance, I have yet to meet the person believing that the claims process was good entertainment. Having the cause of the problem corrected is the very best plan.

Go to www.EnviroSpect.info/FrozenPipes for more information and links to important references and information sources.

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