

Clearing a clogged drain

Easy · 10–30 min to do · \$

YOU'LL NEED

- ☐ A cup plunger (sinks, tubs, showers) or a flange plunger (toilets)
- ☐ Rubber gloves and safety glasses
- ☐ A hand-cranked drain snake
- ☐ Old towels and a bucket

DO IT LIKE THIS

- 1 Stop running water into the drain, so it doesn't overflow while you work.**
- 2 Pick the right plunger.** A cup plunger works best for sink and tub or shower drains. For a toilet, use a flange plunger, which has a soft rubber flap on the bottom that seals better.
- 3 Seal the other opening.** On a double sink, cover the drain you're not plunging so the plunger can build the pressure it needs. Do the same with the small overflow hole near the top of most bathroom sinks and tubs (a wet rag works).
- 4 Plunge.** Make sure the cup is covered by water and sealed over the drain, then push and pull firmly a number of times before lifting. A plunger may work if the blockage is in or near the trap, the U-shaped pipe under the drain.
- 5 Snake it if plunging fails.** A snake is a metal cable with a corkscrew-shaped spring on the end. You feed it into the pipe so it hooks the clog, then pull it out. Snakes are better than plungers at clearing the sludge that causes the next clog. Wear safety glasses and gloves, because dirty water and debris can splash.
- 6 Use chemicals only as a last resort, and follow the label exactly.** Wear rubber gloves and safety glasses, open a window or run a fan, and keep kids and pets away. Pour from close to the drain. Splash-back happens when cleaner is poured from too high, or when too much goes into a completely blocked drain.
- 7 Still clogged?** Call your landlord or a plumber. What looks like one stuck drain can actually be a blockage in a bigger branch line or the building drain. If you already poured in a drain cleaner, tell them, so they can protect themselves from the lye.

Watch out Caustic drain cleaners burn skin, eyes, mouth and throat on contact, instantly, and the injury can't be reversed, only treated. Never mix drain cleaners with each other or with other chemicals like bleach. Mixing some cleaners, like bleach with ammonia or acid, can make toxic fumes. Don't use chemicals in a toilet: the heat of the reaction can crack porcelain. And never pour cleaner into a drink or food container.

DAD NOTE *Plunger, then snake, then call. The bottle is the last thing you reach for, not the first.*

Full lesson: aptkeys.com/tools/hand-tools-and-quick-fixes/clearing-a-clogged-drain/

Checked October 2, 2026. Sources: Consumer Reports; Poison Control (National Capital Poison Center).