

Fixing a running toilet

Easy · 20 to 40 min to do · Usually just the price of a flapper or a fill valve

YOU'LL NEED

- ☐ Food coloring or dye tablets
- ☐ A pencil
- ☐ A sponge and a towel
- ☐ A replacement flapper that fits your toilet (bring the old one to the store)
- ☐ A fill valve kit, if the float turns out to be the problem

DO IT LIKE THIS

- 1 **Listen and look first.** A toilet should only make noise while it refills after a flush. Water still moving in the bowl long after the tank has filled, or a need to jiggle the handle, means a leak.
- 2 **Do the dye test.** Lift the tank lid, add a few drops of food coloring to the tank, and don't flush. If color shows up in the bowl within 10 to 20 minutes, you have a leak. The faster it shows, the bigger the leak. Flush afterward so the dye doesn't stain.
- 3 **Figure out which part is failing.** Mark the water level on the inside back wall of the tank with a pencil. Flush and watch it refill. If the water rises above your mark and then drops, it's probably the flapper. If it keeps rising and spills into the overflow tube, it's probably the fill valve.
- 4 **Fill valve or float problem: lower the water.** Adjust the float (a screw or clip on the fill valve, or the arm on an old float ball) so the water stops about 1/2 inch below the top of the overflow tube. If it still won't shut off, the fill valve can stick open and needs replacing.
- 5 **Flapper problem: check the chain first.** With the handle down, the chain should have about 1/2 inch of slack. Too tight, and the flapper can't seal. Too long, and it can get caught under the flapper.
- 6 **Replace the flapper.** Turn off the valve behind the toilet (clockwise), flush to empty the tank, and sponge out the rest. Unhook the chain from the handle lever, slip the old flapper off the pegs on the overflow tube, and hook on the new one. Reattach the chain with a little slack.
- 7 **Test it.** Turn the water back on, let the tank fill, flush a few times, and run the dye test again.

Watch out If the toilet is about to overflow, turn the valve behind it clockwise to stop the water first, then deal with the rest. If you rent, a leaking toilet is usually your landlord's repair. Report it in writing, and ask before you replace parts.

DAD NOTE Buy the part with the old one in your hand. Saves a second trip.

Full lesson: aptkeys.com/your-place/basic-home-repairs/fixing-a-running-toilet/

Checked October 2, 2026. Sources: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; Clay-Battelle Public Service District; Fluidmaster; Regional Water Providers Consortium.