

Sink and swim

With just a little knowledge and a couple of tools you can do some basic plumbing and save yourself costly callout charges, says **Femke Colborne**. You can even fit bathroom appliances

I would not describe myself as a practical person. I have never even painted a wall, never mind fixed a complex plumbing problem. The closest I've ever come to DIY is sewing a few buttons on a party dress. But today I'm going to accompany Hattie Hasan, who was one of the UK's first female plumbers, on a job. Hasan is charged with teaching me some of the basics of plumbing so I can save myself time, money and, let's face it, embarrassment, in the future.

We don't get off to the best start. "Is that your plumbing outfit?" she shouts, looking me up and down suspiciously as I stride nervously towards her in my Topshop leggings and Ugg boots. I have to admit I am a little worried about the Uggs – "Do you think my feet are going to get wet?" I asked my boyfriend as I left the house this morning. "Not if it's a good plumber," he replied.

At least with Hasan I know I'm in safe hands. She has been a plumber for more than 20 years and has even written a book, *The Joy of Plumbing*. She's also posted several videos on YouTube to show plumbing novices how to do simple jobs at home.

Today we are replacing a sink. Apart from the bit where we have to remove several years' worth of stagnant soap and hair from the plughole, it is surprisingly easy. Once we have turned the water off, it really is just a case of screwing, unscrewing and putting everything back together again in the right order – "like Meccano", as Hasan puts it.

She says the best way to save money on plumbing is to know how to turn your water off. The stop tap can usually be found under the kitchen sink, in a cupboard under the stairs or in the cellar. If something goes wrong in the night and you are able to turn your water off, you can put off calling a plumber until the morning and save yourself an emergency callout fee. "Particularly in cities and at night, it can easily cost you £100 – more in some areas – and it's likely they won't do the repair in the night," she says. "All they will do is avert disaster until the next day, which you can easily do yourself."

The same goes for gas problems. "If you can smell gas, don't call out the gas board," says Hattie. "Turn the gas off and call a plumber. They will find the leak





Put that in your pipe: Hattie Hasan (right) offers Femke Colborne some expert tips. Photo: Rebecca Lupton

and repair it. All the gas board will do is turn the gas off, and you can do that yourself.”

You can also fix a dripping tap at home if you have the right equipment. Washers – the waterproof bit that sits between the tap and the sink – cost about 60p from most good DIY stores, and can be replaced in as little as half an hour (just don't forget to turn the water off first). If in doubt, one of her YouTube videos demonstrates how to change washers. One of the comments is from a woman saying a plumber was going to charge her £60 to fix a dripping tap before she watched the video and did it herself.

Although it might seem more dramatic, an overflowing toilet is also easy to fix, according to Hasan. Another of her videos shows how to change a ball valve – a piece of equipment that should cost no more than £5. You can also save money just by having a few basic tools in the house – all you need is an adjustable spanner and a set of screwdrivers.

“Knowing all this can save you money even if you don't do the work yourself, because it means you're not vulnerable,” says Hasan. “You are able to demonstrate that a plumber can't pull the wool over your eyes and say: ‘You need a new toilet, love.’ If you know nothing, you have no way of knowing how trustworthy they are. Just a little bit of knowledge can go a long way.”

Radiators are another area where you could save money. If a radiator is not working, check the valve – it might just not be turned on. If that doesn't work, try turning all the other radiators down. If the offending radiator is cold at the top, it probably just needs bleeding. You can do this with a radiator key, which costs about £1. If it is cold at the bottom, there is probably sludge in the system – and this is not

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something you should attempt to tackle alone. “I would not recommend messing with radiators,” says Hasan. “If you don't know what you're doing you could create a disaster. If you're not confident, don't try it.”

She recommends turning the heating on for a few hours once a month, even during the summer. “This will keep the pump moving and stop it seizing up,” she says. “When it gets to winter, everyone is doing it and you are at the mercy of a plumber. If you do need it serviced, it is better to do it in the summer.”

Hasan says even some bigger jobs – like replacing a sink – can be done at home. “It's up to the individual and their level of confidence. I'd recommend getting some pipe and fittings and a couple of spanners and practising first without any water. You can blow down the pipes to see if they are watertight. Once you're confident, you can do it.”

But the most important thing, according to Hasan, is to get to know your system – where the stop tap is, how to turn the gas off, how to turn the hot and cold water off and how to identify where the water is coming from. I don't think I'm up to replacing a sink by myself just yet but I've located my stop tap and I'm off to get some spanners. ■

Hattie Hasan is the author of *The Joy of Plumbing – A Guide to Living the Life You Really, Really Want.*

Hattie Hasan's top plumbing tips

Know how to turn your water off. This could save you up to £100 – the average callout charge for an emergency plumber. The stop tap is usually located under the kitchen sink, in a cupboard under the stairs or in the cellar.

Know where your hot water is coming from. Do you have an airing cupboard? Does it have a cylinder of hot water in it? If so, you will need to turn the hot water off by locating the gate valve – a red wheel situated on a large pipe.

Know how to turn your gas off. If you can smell gas, simply find your gas meter and pull the lever into the “off” position. You can then call a plumber in the morning instead of getting the gas board out in the night.

Invest in some basic tools. Having an adjustable spanner and a set of screwdrivers in the house will enable you to tackle many plumbing problems alone.

Get some isolating valves fitted. Count the number of pipes in your house, buy one for each pipe and then hire a plumber to fit them. This should cost no more than £35, and will enable you to isolate the offending pipe if you have a leak without turning your water off.