

Avoiding and handling winter emergencies

A long period of iciness and wintry conditions could mean that you are more likely to experience problems with your water pipes than in a mild winter.

Frozen and burst pipes are inconvenient, and leaks are often expensive to repair. Prepare yourself this winter and avoid the unnecessary waste of water and damage to your home that burst pipes can bring.

1. A **dripping tap** is a sign of a problem and should be fixed. As well as being a waste of water, a dripping tap in freezing conditions may block the waste pipe with ice and possibly cause a problem if left for a long period as the basin, sink or bath may then overflow into the room. Even a gentle trickle of water could freeze and block the pipe.
2. If you have **outside taps**, insulate them, or even better, turn them off and drain them (leaving the tap open to allow any ice to escape) at their isolation valve during the winter.
3. Protect your **pipes, fittings and appliances**. Insulate all pipework in unheated areas like lofts, roofs, outbuildings and garages. Also, lag any cold water storage cisterns in your loft. The necessary equipment is usually available at DIY stores and local plumbers' merchants.

Your water tank should be insulated using approved materials around the sides and top only, ensuring the tank has a correctly fitting lid (insulating underneath will block the flow of warm air from your home and could increase the risk of freezing.)

Insulate your cold water storage cistern using glass fibre lagging or insulating boards

4. Locate and label your **stop tap/s and isolation valves**. These are usually found in the kitchen or utility room, or in a ground floor bathroom or garage - most likely wherever the water pipe enters the premises. Isolation valves are used to turn off water to hot water system, outside taps, appliances (washing machines etc)

If you are leaving your property for a few days over the winter period, it may be a good idea to turn off your water using your branch stop tap.

(Don't rely on the main stop tap, which is often found at the boundary of your property. This is our responsibility and we have specialist equipment with which to isolate a supply if necessary - even without using the main stop tap - for example, if it has become damaged or stuck.)

5. Leave your **loft hatch** slightly open to allow warm air to enter your roof space. But make sure you keep your house secure from unauthorised access.
6. Use your thermostat to **maintain a low level of heat**, or at least set it to come on once or twice a day for a period of time - especially if you are going to be away for a few days. (Your pipes are

more at risk if your house is unoccupied and unheated.).

7. Check your home insurance to ensure you are covered for any emergency repairs.
8. Keep the number of a reputable plumber handy, ideally one who has Approved Plumber registration with the local water supplier. Our sister company - Integrated Water Services has this status and can be contacted on tel: **0121 520 1006** if you want a quote for plumbing work. Or contact a water industry approved plumber via www.wras.co.uk/WIAPS
9. A device called a Froststat can be fitted to the coldest areas within your central heating system. This automatically turns on your heating when the temperature falls below a certain level.
10. Protect the pipe leading to your water meter (if you have one). These tend to be in areas that are particularly vulnerable to the cold and could also freeze, blocking your supply.

What to do if your pipes freeze

1. If you have no water during a severe frost, check with your neighbours. If they have a supply, your pipes may be frozen.
2. Be a good neighbour and check on elderly/less able neighbours and help if necessary.
3. Check your pipes for signs of splitting. Remember that if your pipes are damaged, a burst will only become apparent when the frozen water in the pipes thaws and can escape.

Shut off your internal stop tap and drain your system by flushing the toilet and opening cold taps over sinks/baths etc (Don't turn on the hot taps as this may cause you further problems if the hot water system is also frozen.) Also, switch off the central heating and any water heating appliances (boiler, immersion heater, etc).

If your pipes are intact, open the taps and thaw the pipes slowly with hot water bottles or heated cloths. Always start thawing the pipe at the end nearest the outlet tap. **Never** apply a direct flame.

Once you've thawed your pipes and you're satisfied that no damage is present, and no leakage is occurring, close the taps you have opened and slowly open the stop tap. Check your pipes again now that they're under pressure and only when you're happy switch on water heating appliances, boilers, immersion heaters etc. **Do not do this until you are sure the system has thawed out.** (After freezing has occurred there is a risk of explosion if heat is suddenly applied.)

Remember – all the pipes within your boundary are your responsibility.

If you're in any doubt about what to do please seek expert advice from a plumber.