



Checking on a leaky water heater now can save money later

By JAMES AND MORRIS CAREY
The Associated Press

The average water heater will last about 12 years according to industry statistics. Sadly, far too many water heaters fail long before that. With a bit of periodic maintenance, a water heater should last well into its teens or longer, saving you money and reducing the nation's landfill sites.

Although there are various styles of water heaters in this country, the most popular is the tank type, which is fueled by natural gas. An electric variation contains one or more electrical elements that heat the water. In either case, a water heater will operate more efficiently and last longer if you perform a few routine tasks.

The most common reason for water heater replacement is a leaking tank. Although leaks can occur for a host of reasons, the two most common ones are sediment buildup at the base of the tank and electrolysis. Sediment can cause excessive temperatures that stress the tank lining, and electrolysis will result in pinhole leaks in the tank's lining.

Remove sediment buildup at the base of the tank by flushing the tank at least once annually and more often if you have hard water. To flush the water heater, attach a garden hose to the drain valve at the base of the tank and run the hose out to a location where hot water can be safely drained. Turn the valve on and allow it to run for several minutes — until the water becomes clear. Since you will be dealing with hot water, be careful not to get

burned.

For water heaters that have not been flushed in ages (those that might have much sediment at the base of the tank), we suggest using a chemical additive that will help dissolve the sediment and facilitate the flushing process. Such a chemical can be found in the plumbing or water heater section or your local hardware store or home-improvement center. Another excellent resource is a plumbing supply house that sells to the trade.

Use the chemical in strict accordance with the directions on the label. Usually the cold-water supply valve to the water heater will need to be turned off and the supply line removed from the top of the water heater so that the solutions can be poured into the water heater. After a time — usually several hours — the water heater can be flushed as described earlier.

Another sediment-busting technique that is being used by many water heater manufacturers is a curved dip tube. The dip tube is a small-diameter plastic pipe that carries water from the cold-water inlet at the top of the water heater to within 12 inches or so of the base of the tank where the burners are located. A curve at the end of the dip tube (placed at the proper angle) will create a swirling action that will help reduce sediment buildup and assist in the flushing process.

Pinhole leaks in the tank lining are prevented by a cathodic or "sacrificial" anode that is located inside the tank. It is a vertical rod with a hex head that runs from the top of the tank to within about a foot of the base. As its name implies, the anode is

designed to give itself up to protect the integrity of the tank. Depending on its composition (zinc, magnesium or aluminum), the water quality and whether you have a water softener, an anode can require replacement as often as once a year. An anode should, however, last about three years. A replacement anode can be found in the water heater-plumbing section of your local hardware store or home center or at a plumbing supply store that sells to the trade. Removal and replacement can be a daunting task that might best be left to a plumber. However, if you wish to attempt the undertaking, information on how to do it can be found at our Web site at www.onthehouse.com.

Water at the base of a tank is not always the result of a leaking tank and, thus, will not necessarily require replacement. A leaking water connection that might not be visible at the top of the tank can trickle down the outside (inside the outer shell of the tank) and show itself as a puddle of water on the floor below the tank. Careful inspection of the various connections using a dry towel and a flashlight might reveal a leak that can easily be repaired with a wrench in a matter of seconds.

The hot- and cold-water connections at the top of the water heater usually are made with flexible copper supply lines that are attached to the water heater with short lengths of pipe called nipples. Brass nipples and or dielectric unions should be used to prevent electrolysis. In addition, all pipe threads should be wrapped with Teflon tape or a similar material that prevents leaks.

Another likely location for a leaking water heater is the temperature and pressure relief valve (TP&R valve). The TP&R valve is a safety valve that is designed to open when the water in the tank becomes too hot or the pressure in the tank becomes excessive. The valve is attached to the tank by a threaded connection. Like the water supply connections at the top of the water heater, the TP&R connection can leak. The valve must be removed, the threads wrapped with Teflon tape, and then reinstalled to stop the leak. A faulty TP&R valve can be another, more serious, cause for a leak. A leaking TP&R valve should immediately be replaced to prevent a potential explosion.

The drain valve is another primary location on a leaking water heater. Unfortunately, most manufacturer-installed valves are of poor quality. Consequently, the valve can be difficult to operate and can leak at the spigot or at the location where it is connected to the tank. Therefore, we suggest replacing the cheaply manufactured gate valve with a high-quality brass-ball valve that can be easily operated. The ball valve will also facilitate the flushing process by improving the volume of water allowed to exist in the tank during the flushing process. Since a ball valve is opened and closed with a right angle turn, we suggest that you install a brass cap on the discharge port of the valve to prevent accidental operation that can result in burning or a flood.

Be alert to your water heater's needs and it will give you many years of energy-efficient, dependable service.

Common causes of gas heater noise

The three most common causes of banging at the gas water heater are sediment buildup at the bottom of the tank, misadjusted burners or overheating due to a faulty thermostat or high-limit switch. Burners fueled with natural gas should burn with a bright blue flame with a soft blue-green interior and no yellow tips. Finally, open the temperature pressure-relief valve located somewhere near the top of the water heater, permitting some water to escape through the drain line. If steam or boiling water escapes, you definitely are overheating the water and that might be causing the banging. If this condition exists, you should immediately turn off the gas to the unit and have a plumber make the proper repairs.

Many uses for utility knives

By JAMES AND MORRIS CAREY
The Associated Press

There are several tools used in just about all the construction trades.

One is at the top of our list — the utility knife. It's also known as a razor knife, and what a handy tool it is. It does everything from opening boxes to stripping electric cable to sharpening a carpenter's pencil.

Don't confuse a utility knife with a razor blade. A utility knife should not be used where a razor blade does the trick. For example: installing or patching wallpaper is a razor-blade function, not a utility knife. Cleaning paint off a window, again, is a razor blade's job. The blade of a utility knife is too thick for this task.

Whereas a razor blade is ultra-thin and ultra-sharp, a utility-knife blade is thicker and more sturdy; it's made for heavier cutting.

The next time you meet a construction worker wearing a tool pouch, ask to see his utility knife. The handle will be smooth and discolored from repeated use, but the blade inside will probably be shiny and sharp.

There are several varieties available on the market. Some have large ergonomic handles and others are made of plastic. We have our favorite. It's the standard metal-handled kind (call us old fashioned) with the quick blade-removal button, the flip-out blade storage compartment and, most important, the retractable-blade feature. We don't like taking our utility knife apart to change blades. It takes too long. Our choice, however, isn't necessarily any better than the others.

A list of things for which we've used our razor knife:

- Unsticking windows that were painted shut
- Double cutting a linoleum floor patch
- Mortise-cutting a door striker plate
- Cutting the rounded corners off an eased mortise to accommodate a square bolt plate
- Etching a veneer panel prior to cutting it, to prevent splintering
- Sharpening a pencil
- Cutting rope, string and twine
- Removing door and-or window trim without ripping or tearing up the existing paint job

When it comes to contractors, homeowners have homework, too

The Associated Press

It's not just contractors who shoulder a burden of preparation before starting a home improvement job for a customer.

Homeowners have considerable, if not more, pre-project work to do especially when it comes to readying contractors for the task ahead.

According to an expert at The Home Service Store, very few homeowners truly prepare themselves and the contractor for the home-improvement process. The result: frustration, anxiety and misunderstanding, or, worse yet, laying blame where it might not belong — on contractor shoulders.

"Clear-cut homeowner-contractor expectations should be the norm, but it's the exception," said Mark Gordon of The Home Service Store. "Owners need to supply as much detail as they can for the contractor in terms of the end result, materials, timetables, everything. The more detail, the better. That's what the contractor wants."

Goal No. 1 for homeowners: a

list of specific goals for the project. It's a red flag to Gordon when homeowners say they don't know what they want, simply tell the contractor to call when the project is done or don't clue the contractor in on the level of participation the homeowner wants. That's where problems start.

"Whether they want to or not, the homeowner must bring as much information as possible to the first pre-construction meeting, or the contractor won't know enough to accurately bid on the job let alone do the work," said Gordon. "If the homeowner doesn't want a lot of involvement, that's OK, but the contractor should insist on at least minimal homeowner involvement on budget and selection of materials so the contractor isn't left holding the bag."

Both sides should insist on frequent meetings of at least one hour once the job starts. If the parties go one week without meeting, that's too long for Gordon. "And the meeting should include everyone involved, the husband and wife or partner," advises Gordon, who's seen his share of predicaments "that

could've been dealt with right away but weren't."

Homeowners typically limit their involvement to design and materials but the process goes well beyond that. In Gordon's estimation, homeowners need to set ground rules for what might seem to be trivial pursuits, but have profound impact on satisfaction with the end product. His list includes work hours, smoking and eating on the premises, access to the job site, loudness of music, where to park, which bathroom or phone to use, etc. "The customer is really inviting the contractor to be a part of the family as long as the work goes on," said Gordon. "Questions and concerns are going to come up and it's all about how you deal with those day-to-day issues."

Chief among those issues is what Gordon calls a punch list. This is a daily log the homeowner keeps of correctable items. Such imperfections include indentations on drywall or a gap between mitered corners. Gordon is quick to point out that design elements such as wall placement or materials that

were the homeowner's responsibility should not be on this quick-fix list.

"A lot of the time, homeowners don't recognize the role they play in the entire process," said Gordon. Quality of the work is important, but so is the homeowner's role in keeping things moving smoothly."

How homeowners should prepare for home improvement projects:

- Have a complete list of materials ready to ensure accurate bids from multiple contractors.
- Write a list of expectations for the project to share with your contractor.
- Schedule one-hour meetings to be held at least weekly with your contractor.
- Tell your contractor the level of involvement you want with the project.
- Set work hours, establish parking spaces, and designate a bathroom for workers.
- Inspect the job daily. Tell the contractor immediately of any problems.
- Spend \$50 on a lock-box to limit access to the job site.

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How to patch a hardwood floor

Black stains on a hardwood floor usually mean there's need for replacement. If the planks are square-edged, removal with a hammer and chisel followed by nailing down new replacement boards is as complex as it gets. If the damaged material is tongue and groove, use a circular saw to rip and remove about one-half inch of the center of the plank to be replaced. With the center of the damaged plank out of the way, pry the remaining pieces toward the center and away from their respective tongue and groove. To install a new piece, simply remove the lip below the groove, insert the new tongue into the old groove and hand-nail into place. Sanding and staining and a clear protective finish are all that is needed to complete the job.

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