

Protecting Pipes From Freezing

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The freezing weather that Northern Colorado has had lately is an ominous warning that winter is here. If you haven't winterized your pipes, there is no time to lose. A small crack in a water line can release up to 250 gallons a day soaking everything around it. An average of a quarter-million families have their homes ruined and their lives disrupted each winter all because of water pipes that freeze, burst and soak their surroundings.

With the rising cost of natural gas, homeowners will be cutting back where they can including closing off infrequently used rooms. This may have the unintended consequence of frozen water pipes as those pipes were probably staying warm from the home's heat. With that heat gone the pipes don't receive enough residual heat and will freeze. In most cases pipes will not split the first time they are frozen. However each time they freeze the area will weaken until the pipe splits. Frozen water pipes aren't life threatening, however frozen or broken water pipes do cause extensive damage to homes each winter.

As a home inspector I frequently see leaks from frost-proof spigots. Homeowners believe since it is frost-proof that they don't have to take any measures to protect it. However this spigot is only frost-proof if you remove your hose connection (and water contained within). When the hose is left connected the water remaining inside the spigot freezes, cracking the housing. This break is within the wall and only leaks when the spigot is actually turned on. Frequently this type of break causes longer-term problems because it is not easily seen and may cause mold inside the wall cavity where the break is.

Has your sprinkler system been winterized yet? Winterizing is simple and is accomplished one of two ways. Most systems are blown out with compressed air and the main connection is turned off and drained. The second way is to drain the system however the system must have drains installed at the lowest point in the lines. In most cases people know right away in spring if their sprinkler system is damaged from freezing by the fountain of water erupting from the lawn. However in the last year I have seen two cases where the leaks were smaller and belowground. In both cases the crawl spaces were turned into swamps and mold was found growing on the ground and walls. These homeowners were lucky in a sense that they didn't have any foundation issues caused by the expansive soils we have in the area, however the cost of removing the mold ran into several thousand dollars.

To prevent the mess and aggravation frozen pipes cause, protect your home or apartment by following the simple steps below.

Before Cold Weather

- Locate and insulate pipes most susceptible to freezing, typically those near outer walls, in crawl spaces or in the attic. Use insulation made especially for this purpose.
- Wrap exposed pipes with heat tape (UL-approved).
- Seal any leaks that allow cold air inside where pipes are located.
- Disconnect garden hoses and drain water from pipes leading to outside faucets.
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When It's Cold

- If you have pipes that are prone to freezing let water trickle at night from a faucet.
- Open cabinet doors to allow more heat to get to uninsulated pipes under a sink or appliance near an outer wall.
- Make sure heat is left on and set no lower than 55 degrees F.
- If you plan to be away have someone check your house daily to make sure the heat is still on to prevent freezing and shut off the water system (except indoor fire sprinkler systems).

If Pipes Freeze

- If you can locate the area where the pipe is frozen bring in a portable heater and warm the area. If the pipe is accessible, take a blow dryer and warm pipe directly. Never try to thaw a pipe with an open flame or torch.
- Make sure you and your family knows how to shut off the water, in case pipes burst. Stopping the flow of water can minimize the damage to your home.
- If you can't local the frozen area, call a plumber to assist with thawing and to check for damage.
- If the leak is extensive, contact your insurance agent. Most insurance companies have restoration companies that can quickly respond and minimize the water damage
- If the leak is localized, dry everything as quickly as possible. If the area is carpeted, contact a carpeting company. In most cases you will not be able to dry carpeting without pulling it up as the carpet pad absorbs water like a sponge. A wet carpet will start growing mold within 3 days and once mold is in carpeting, it cannot be removed.

Rick Bunzel is the Principle Inspector at Mountain View Property Inspections. If you would like to know more about your home go to **WWW.MVPinspection.com** If you have questions or comments, Rick Bunzel can be contacted at Mountain View Property Inspections @ 303-443-9063 or MVPInspection@comcast.net