

# HOW TO OPERATE YOUR HOME

So you own a home—and you're not sure what to do next?  
Here's your operating instructions!



## Plumbing Traps

Necessary – But...Yuck!

Plumbing drains – yuck. Hair, black stuff and other indescribables often block drains and tubs, creating a mess. Why do drains have those silly bends and traps that catch this junk, and how can you clean them?

All plumbing fixtures connected to a drainage system have a trap. It looks like a “u” or a sideways “p” below the fixture. The trap holds (traps) water, creating a seal that prevents stinky sewer gas from entering your home. You want that trap. You need that trap. The problem is, the trap can also snag debris and cause a plugged drain.

Most problems with clogs occur at sinks and tubs that get constant use. Hair and other debris collects in the traps.

If you place some type of strainer or screen over the drain to trap debris, this may eliminate the need to clean the trap.

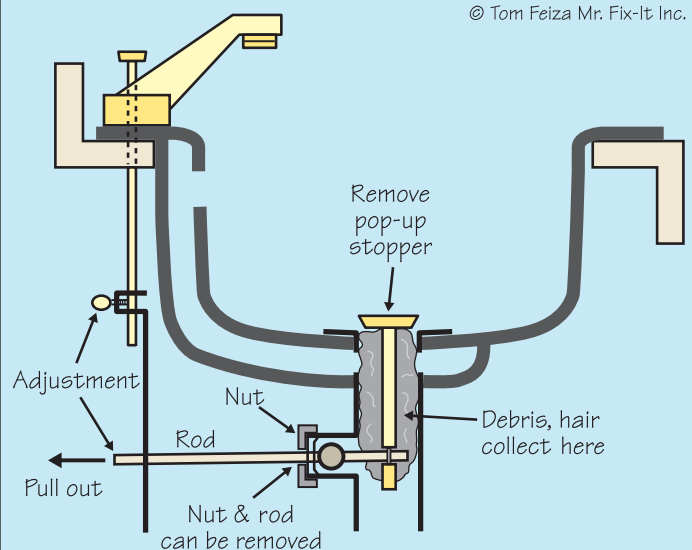
The strainer or screen might not be enough to eliminate all clogs. Although it's an unpleasant job, eventually the trap or drain must be cleaned. Here are a few tips to make the job easier.

At a bathroom sink or tub drain, hair often catches at the pop-up stopper (illustration P099). You can fix the problem by removing the stopper and clearing the junk. Often you can remove both the stopper and the mechanism that opens and closes it. This may involve removing a little nut and rod on a sink. For a tub with a typical older stopper, you can pull the stopper from the drain or the overflow and remove the lever to access the mechanism. In a newer tub, it's often possible to twist the stopper and lift it from the drain.

To clear a drain, buy a trap-cleaning tool, or use a piece of wire (illustration P101). The new stiff yet flexible plastic tool that looks like a very thin evergreen tree can often be purchased at the grocery store. You remove the stopper and slip

### Sink Plugged - Remove Stopper

© Tom Feiza Mr. Fix-It, Inc.



Most slow-flowing bath sinks are caused by hair and debris collecting on the stopper and levers. Loosen the nut on the control rod, slide out, remove stopper and clean debris.

P099

(Continued, next page)

Featured in this issue:

- Three-Way Switch Confusion
- Remove Driveway Oil Stains

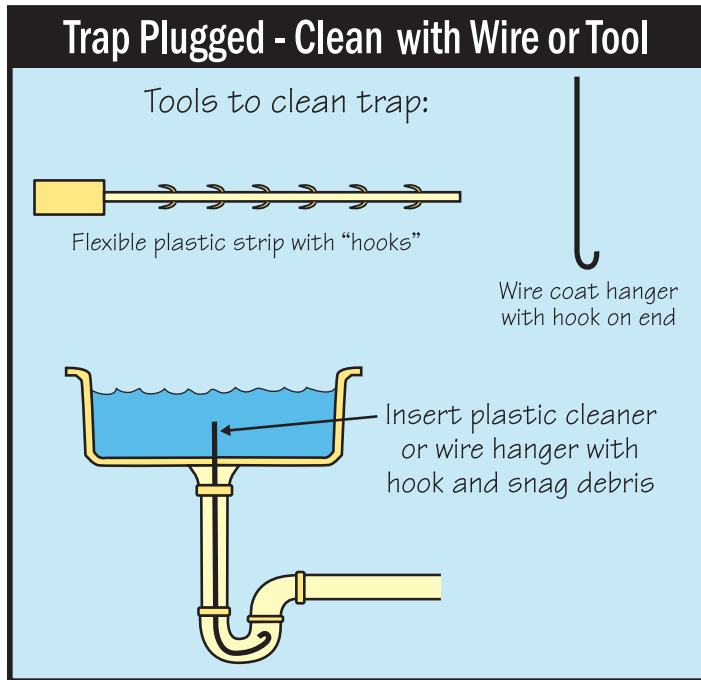
How To Operate Your Home – Summer 2008  
© 2008 - Tom Feiza - Mr. Fix-It, Inc.

Publisher: Tom Feiza (tom@misterfix-it.com)  
Layout: Tom Feiza III (tomfeiza@gmail.com)  
Editing: Leah Carson (luv2cre8@wi.rr.com)

This newsletter contains basic information on homes not wholly applicable to every situation. Seek professional advice prior to acting on information contained herein. To reprint any article, please contact our office.

## Plumbing traps (continued)

this tool into the trap to catch all the hairy debris. You can also try this with the stopper in place and lifted up, but this doesn't work as well.



P101

You could try the age-old coat hanger solution: cut a long strip of wire and put a hook in the end. Go fishing for the debris.

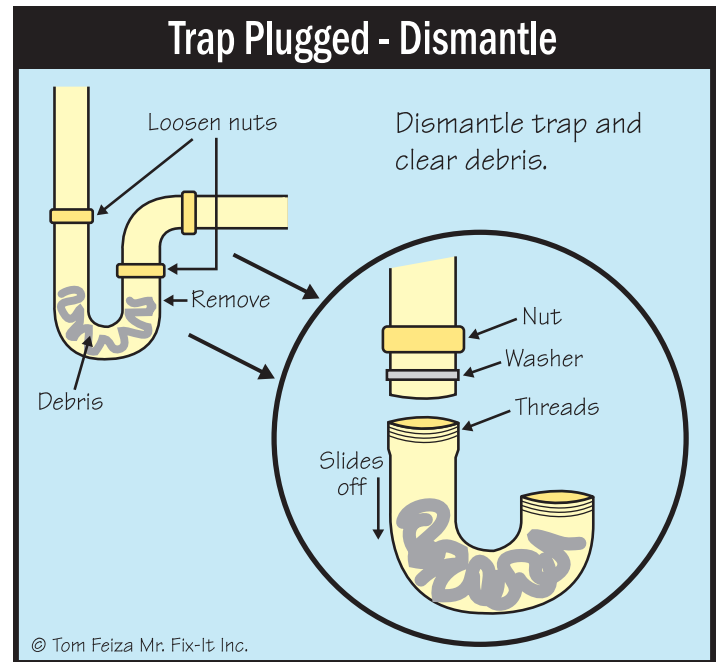
If the trap is really clogged, you must dismantle it. This is simple with new plastic plumbing. Place a bucket below the trap and loosen the nuts on both ends of the trap. The trap should slip from the pipes. Often the nuts can be loosened by hand, but sometimes slip joint pliers are required.

For folks whose homes have old steel or brass piping, the process is the same, but nuts and fittings will be much more difficult to loosen and move. This requires a wrench, some plumbing skills and a little luck.

Once the trap is open, dump out the debris and clean the trap. While you have the drain open, snake out the pipe going

into the wall, or at least remove visible debris. Reassemble in reverse, slightly tightening the nuts.

At this point, you may wonder: why not use those chemicals that will quickly clear a drain with a resounding suck and slurp? Don't. Often the chemicals don't work, and they can damage pipes. Once you have strong chemicals in the trap and they haven't cleared the clog, you must clean a trap full of nasty junk *and* nasty chemicals.



P102

The plumbing experts I deal with do recommend enzyme-type cleaners that are routinely placed in a drain *before* it clogs. The enzymes apparently dissolve the yucky stuff over time to keep clogs from forming. These products will not work on already-plugged traps.

The new thin plastic strip with hooks does a great job and costs just a few bucks. The directions say to discard the tool once it is used, but most of us inventive types simply clean off the debris and save the strip for future use. Remember that the clog consists of nasty stuff, so wear rubber gloves and disinfect everything after finishing your project.

### Mr. Fix-It Quick Tip

## Oil Stains on the Driveway

Oil stains can be removed from concrete or asphalt with a strong detergent and a little scrubbing. Try TSP, TSP substitute or MEX. Following label directions, mix a strong solution with very hot water and scrub the stain with a stiff brush. It may require several scrubblings and a little soaking with the cleaning solution, but eventually the oil will be removed. Rinse well after cleaning. Be prepared to scrub the whole driveway, because the spot you scrub may become lighter than the rest of the pavement.



## The Honey-Do List – Tom and Gayle Feiza

### Three-Way Switch Confusion

**Gayle:** You really need to fix that ceiling light in the dining room.

**Tom:** Really? We've lived here for years, hon, and that light works just fine.

**Gayle:** You just ignore the problem. One wall light switch turns the fixture on and off – but only if the switch on the other side of the room is in the up position. If that switch is down, the light doesn't work.

**Tom:** Well, I guess I'm just used to walking across the room and trying both switches until the light goes on. It must have been set up by the guy who owned the house before us. Is it really that big of a problem?

**Gayle:** Well, no, but you are a fix-it guy, and I would expect everything to work well in your home. Right?

**Tom:** You've got a good point. Let's see here. Hmmm – the problem is the switch. Someone substituted a single pole switch for a three-way switch. Let's look for marking on the switch. Ah, yes – one switch has "ON-OFF" marked on it, and the other one has no marking. The switch with no marking is the three-way switch.

**Gayle:** Now you've got me confused. Two switches control the light, so why do they call it a three-way switch?

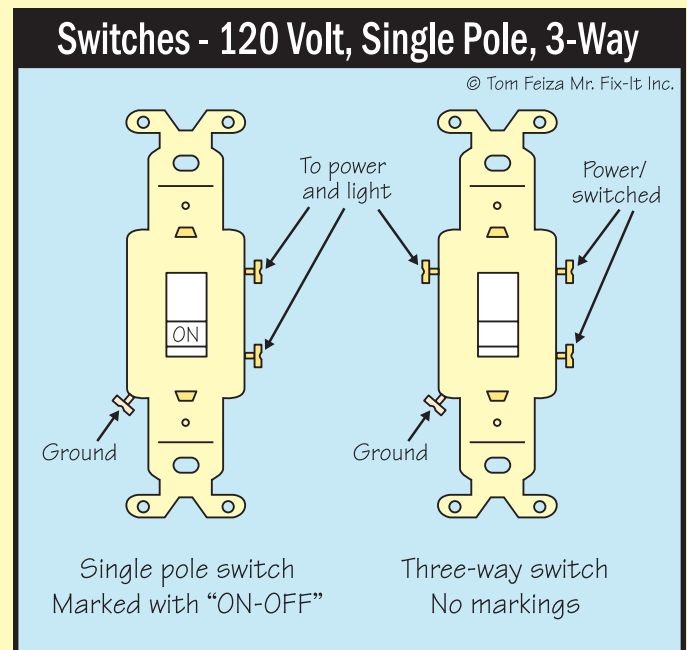
**Tom:** Because they do. I don't know why, but what I do know is that if you want to control one light with two switches, each of those must be a three-way switch. Makes sense, doesn't it? The three-way switch has a power connection plus an additional power/switch connection, throwing power back and forth between the switches. You also need an extra wire between the switches to make them work. In our case the switch marked "ON-OFF" can be converted to a three-way switch if there is an extra wire in the wall. You might call it a switch switch. Get it? Switch-switch?

**Gayle:** You missed your calling, dear. You should've been a stand-up comic. And now it would be great if you can switch the switch for the proper three-way switch.

**Tom:** I'll give it a try, but if the wiring is not there or if there's a pile of wires inside the electrical switch box, we'll be calling an electrician. I don't mind doing very simple electrical work, but when it gets confusing we need an expert.

**Gayle:** We need an expert anyway. You know we should get that exterior GFCI replaced, and the garage light near the door operator keeps burning out bulbs, and I really want a new ceiling fan in our bedroom. Let's call an electrician.

**Tom:** Great idea. (under his breath) And a little less fix-it work I need to do around here.



E036

*Tom Feiza, "Mr. Fix-It," is a professional home-improvement expert. His wife, Gayle, keeps track of the couple's lengthy to-do list.*