

Low temps could mean frozen pipes

Written by Darci Tomky

With temperatures plummeting well below zero this winter, many Holyoke residents are concerned about frozen pipes.

Each winter about 250,000 homes are ruined because of burst water pipes. But the good news is that below-freezing temperatures don't necessarily have to mean frozen pipes.

How to prevent frozen pipes

City Supt. Mark Brown said there are simple steps people can take that will greatly decrease their chances of frozen pipes. Consider taking these precautions during these cold winter months:

- Disconnect outside garden hoses and seal foundation cracks that let in cold air.

- Run a small trickle of water from hot and cold faucets during extreme cold.

- Open cabinet doors to allow heat to get to piping under sinks and vanities near exterior walls.

- Avoid turning the thermostat heat too low, especially if no one is at home.

- If planning an out-of-town trip, have friends or neighbors check the house frequently or consider turning the main valve off altogether and drain the system.

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—Search for pipes that are not insulated or that pass through unheated spaces like crawlspaces, basements or garages. Wrap these with pre-molded foam rubber sleeves or fiberglass insulation.

—Save on energy bills by wrapping water heaters with an insulation blanket.

—Insulate the outdoor water meter box and be sure its lid is on tight.

—Keep exterior doors to unheated spaces closed as much as possible during winter months.

—Clean out gutters and downspouts to remove debris that could freeze and cause clogs during cold weather.

How to deal with frozen pipes

Some unfortunate homes will still experience frozen pipes this winter, and Brown cautions people to take action to prevent further damage to their homes.

When water freezes, it expands, taking up more space in the pipe. This is true regardless of whether it is PVC, iron or lead plumbing, and it's especially true with copper pipes. When a pipe freezes, ruptures or cracks and then unfreezes, leaks occur.

If there is suspicion water pipes have frozen, turn off the water at the main shut-off valve. It's crucial to stop leaks immediately, so make sure everyone in the family knows where the shut-off valve is located.

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Don't take any chances—call a plumber to help find and repair the broken pipe.

If a frozen pipe has not burst, thaw it out with an electric heating pad, hair dryer, portable space heater or towel soaked with hot water. Apply heat by slowly moving the heat source toward the coldest spot on the pipe.

Brown warned that it's possible to thaw a pipe too quickly. Never concentrate heat in one spot because cracking ice can shatter a pipe.

Finally, turn the faucet on and let it run until the pipe is thawed and water pressure returns to normal.

Brown added if Holyoke residents feel there is a problem with the meter outside their home, city crews can check on it. Most of the time, however, the problem lies within the home and the owners will need to seek assistance from a plumber.