

Do I have to replace all the galvanized pipes in my 1940s house?

By [Jeanne Huber](#)

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Q: *I live in a 1940s house that has galvanized pipes. The cold-water tap in the bathtub has become blocked. A plumber said debris is clogging the pipe, and the only thing I can do is repipe the whole house. Is this my only option?*

Silver Spring, Md.

A: There are a couple of other options, but, in the end, the best one is probably what the plumber recommended.

Galvanized pipes, which were used for decades, are made of steel with a coating of zinc, inside and out, to keep the steel from rusting. But over the decades, minerals in water gradually eat away the zinc, and the coating itself wears down from the friction of passing water. Wherever the zinc wears through, rust can form and build up. Rust takes up more space than steel, so the corrosion eventually fills up the pipe. “It’s a rusty, crusty mess,” said Tim Whistler, owner of Tim Whistler Plumbing & Gas Fitting (301-648-9676; timwhistlerplumbing.com), which works in parts of Maryland and Washington.

No piping system lasts forever. Many plumbing websites say galvanized pipes have a life expectancy of 40 to 50 years, while others say 80 to 100. Clearly, the lower range wasn’t accurate for the pipes in your house. But at 80 or older, the clock is ticking.

You can find advice online about unclogging galvanized pipes by injecting compressed air to force out debris. But this can just shove the mess farther down the line, where it can collect in plumbing bends or clog up faucets, Whistler said. It wouldn’t fix any rust that has formed at threaded joints. And because the pipes are hidden behind walls, there would be no way to know whether the air pressure had blasted through weak spots where the steel was mostly rusted through — until you switched the water back on, only to discover soggy walls, floors or ceilings.

Some companies have built on the idea of blasting away debris by offering a service that blows out the corrosion with forced air, then sprays in an epoxy lining to protect the remaining steel from further corrosion. The big advantage is that it repairs the corroded pipes without the mess that would result from digging up soil or breaking through walls to switch the piping. This process is well-established for sewer drain lines and water lines in commercial buildings, which are wider than residential water lines. One concern regarding residential water lines would be whether the coating reached all the surfaces.

One company that uses the epoxy-lining process in the Washington area is Specialized Pipe Technologies (855-817-

9861; sptpipe.com). But it no longer treats residential water lines, just drain lines and commercial water lines.

President Justin Mizell said the pipe diameter of residential water lines is too small to snake a camera through after the epoxy is applied. “We need to verify, to make sure it’s all coated,” he said. “We used to do residential, but two years later, there’d be a leak.” The best solution? “Just repipe,” he said.

The final option, short of replacing all the pipes, is to replace just the section that’s clogged. But there is a good chance other sections of pipe also are corroded. Instead of discovering low flow at another faucet, you might first notice where the remaining old pipe has rusted through and started to leak. A spokeswoman at Heil Plumbing DMV (240-451-1083; heilplumbingdmv.com) said spot repairs often turn out to be short-term fixes, at best. “It’s a Band-Aid — an expensive Band-Aid,” she said.

For a long-term fix, replacing all the pipes is the best option. But it isn’t cheap or hassle-free. Whistler said the cost often ranges between \$6,000 and \$10,000 for a house with three bathrooms, but that’s just for the plumbing work, which includes cutting wall or ceiling surfaces to access the pipes. Replumbing an upstairs bathroom generally requires removing the entire ceiling in the room underneath. And replacing pipes for a tiled-in tub or shower means cutting through from the other side of the wall. If that’s an exterior wall, it gets even more complicated, Whistler said, because today’s insulation standards are different from those years ago. On one recent job, the client eventually decided to relocate a tub, so the piping could run through an interior wall.

Whistler said repiping a house often takes a crew of three experienced plumbers three to six days. The owners, who will usually move out while the work is done, can choose copper or PEX piping; PEX costs less than copper.

Many houses with galvanized pipes that need replacing have plaster walls, which are more expensive to patch than ones covered with drywall. In some areas, it’s difficult even to find a company that does plaster repairs. Whistler said that, for their jobs, they suggest calling Bartholow Drywall in Kensington, Md. (301-897-0921; bartholowdrywall.com), which patches both plaster and drywall. Estimating the cost for these repairs is impossible without inspecting the house, but a hint of what price you might need to multiply by was a \$2,467 bill for repairing walls and ceilings in one bedroom and one bathroom where pipes leaked.

In some parts of the country, companies have gotten pipe replacement down to a science. Repipe Specialists (800-737-4746; repipespecialists.com), which is based in Burbank, Calif., offers a package deal to customers: It does both the plumbing and patching. The company claims that, because it has to patch the holes it cuts, it has techniques that minimize the damage, so it can often repipe a house in a day, with the water turned off only in the middle of the day.

But a spokeswoman said the company does not operate in the Washington area.

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