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EVERYDAY PRACTICAL

Clear a Blocked Sink Yourself, in 4 Days

In four short sessions, learn to diagnose and clear a blocked sink with basic tools — and to recognise the blockages that are not yours to fix.

4-day guide · 5 chapters · Self-Directed Learning Framework

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide was built with the Self-Directed Learning Framework (SDLF): every chapter gives you a short starting action, the one idea you actually need, a fully worked example, a checklist, and exercises done on your own sink — no filler, no re-reading required.

Important: this is general practical guidance for an ordinary household sink, not advice for your specific plumbing. Stop and call a licensed plumber if several fittings back up at once, if water comes back up somewhere else, if there is any sewage smell or overflow, or if you are renting — in most tenancies drains are the landlord's responsibility and you may be liable for damage you cause. Never mix drain chemicals, and never plunge a drain that has chemical cleaner standing in it. Work through the chapters in order; each takes 20–35 minutes.

WHAT'S INSIDE

01	Working Out What Kind of Blockage You Have	Day 1 · 25 min
02	Hot Water, and Plunging So It Actually Works	Day 2 · 30 min
03	Opening the Trap — the Fix That Usually Works	Day 3 · 35 min
04	The Snake, and Knowing Where to Stop	Day 4 · 30 min
05	Keeping It Clear	Day 4 · 20 min

CHAPTER 1 OF 5 · DAY 1 · 25 MIN

Working Out What Kind of Blockage You Have

> **Outcome:** "I know whether this is my sink's problem or the whole drain's problem."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Run the taps in every other sink, the bath and the shower for thirty seconds each. What happens elsewhere tells you more than the blocked sink does.

The minimum you need to know

Before touching anything, answer one question: **is this one fitting or the whole system?** If only this sink drains slowly and everything else is fine, the blockage is in that sink's own pipework — the plughole, the trap or the short run behind it — and it is yours to fix. If the bath gurgles when you empty the sink, if several fittings are slow, or if water comes up in a different one, the blockage is further down the shared drain and nothing you do at this sink will reach it. That is a plumber's job, and continuing can push the problem somewhere worse. The second question is **what kind of sink**. Kitchen blockages are almost always **grease**, which cools in the pipe and then catches everything else passing through. Bathroom blockages are almost always **hair bound with soap**, usually within the first few centimetres of the plughole. Same symptom, different cause, different fix — and knowing which you have saves you from the two hours most people waste trying the wrong one.

Worked example: two sinks, two diagnoses

Kitchen sink drains but takes a minute, and there is a faint smell. Bath, shower and basin all run away normally. That is a local grease blockage building up in the trap, and it is fixable in this guide. Second case: the bathroom basin is slow, and when it does empty the shower tray fills slightly and gurgles. Two fittings responding to one another means the blockage is in the shared waste pipe past both of them. Nothing at the basin will touch it, and plunging hard could force water back into the shower instead. That one gets a phone call, not a plunger. Thirty seconds of running other taps was the whole diagnosis.

Checklist

- ☐ Every other sink, bath and shower tested before starting
- ☐ Established whether one fitting or several are affected
- ☐ Checked whether emptying one fitting affects another
- ☐ Identified the likely cause: grease in a kitchen, hair and soap in a bathroom
- ☐ Stopped and planned to call a plumber if more than one fitting is involved
- ☐ Checked your tenancy if you rent — drains are usually the landlord's responsibility

Exercises

1. Run every drain in your home and note which are fast, slow or gurgling.
2. Look under your blocked sink and photograph the pipework, so you know what you are dealing with.
3. Write down which of the two causes — grease or hair — your sink most likely has, and why.

CHAPTER 2 OF 5 · DAY 2 · 30 MIN

Hot Water, and Plunging So It Actually Works

> **Outcome:** "I have tried the two cheapest fixes properly, not half-heartedly."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Find the small hole near the top rim of your sink. That is the overflow, and it is the reason most people's plunging does nothing.

The minimum you need to know

Two fixes cost nothing and clear a good share of blockages, but both are usually done wrong. **Hot water and washing-up liquid** works on grease and only on grease: a good squirt of detergent down the plughole, left five minutes, then a kettle of *hot but not boiling* water poured slowly. Not boiling, because boiling water can soften plastic waste pipes and crack a porcelain sink. Repeat it twice before deciding it failed. **Plunging** works on anything, but only if you get a seal — and a sink has a second opening most people forget. That small hole near the rim is the **overflow**, and it is connected to the same pipe, so every push you make escapes through it. **Block the overflow with a wet cloth held firmly**, put enough water in the sink to cover the plunger cup, and work with short sharp pushes — twenty of them, not three. The pull is what shifts the blockage as much as the push. And the one rule with no exceptions: if chemical drain cleaner has already gone down there, do not plunge, because you will splash caustic liquid into your own face.

Worked example: the plunge that finally worked

Kitchen sink, slow for a week. First attempt: plunger over the plughole, four hard pushes, water sloshes about and nothing changes. The overflow is wide open the whole time, so most of the pressure is going up and out of it rather than down the pipe. Second attempt, done properly: detergent down the plughole, left five minutes, a kettle of hot water poured slowly. Still slow. Then a folded wet tea towel pressed hard over the overflow by one hand, the sink filled with about five centimetres of water, plunger seated flat over the plughole to cover it completely, and twenty short sharp strokes — pulling as deliberately as pushing. On the fifteenth the water drops away with a distinct gulp. Total time, including the failed first attempt, about twelve minutes.

Checklist

- ☐ Detergent and hot — not boiling — water tried twice on a kitchen sink
- ☐ Overflow found and blocked with a wet cloth before plunging
- ☐ Enough water in the sink to cover the plunger cup completely
- ☐ Plunger seated flat so it seals against the sink base
- ☐ Twenty short sharp strokes, pulling as hard as pushing, not three half-hearted pushes
- ☐ No plunging if chemical drain cleaner has been used — no exceptions

Exercises

1. Locate the overflow on every sink in your home.
2. Do one full plunging cycle with the overflow blocked, and compare it to one without.
3. Time how long your sink takes to empty before and after, so you can tell partial success from none.

CHAPTER 3 OF 5 · DAY 3 · 35 MIN

Opening the Trap — the Fix That Usually Works

> **Outcome:** "I can take the trap off, clean it and put it back without a leak."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Open the cupboard under your sink and find the U-shaped or bottle-shaped piece of pipe. That is the trap, and it is almost certainly where your blockage is.

The minimum you need to know

The **trap** is the bend under the plughole. It holds a little water permanently, and that water is the seal that stops drain smells coming back into the room. It is also the lowest point in the pipe, which is why grease, food and hair collect there — and why opening it clears most kitchen blockages outright. On modern plastic pipework it comes apart by hand: two threaded rings, **unscrewed anticlockwise**. Older metal traps may need a wrench and are more fragile. Three things separate a twenty-minute job from a flooded cupboard. **Put a bucket underneath first** — the trap is full of water by design and all of it is coming out. **Clear everything out of the cupboard** before you start, so nothing you own is sitting in the splash zone. And **check the rubber washers** when you reassemble: they must be seated flat and the right way round, because a washer pinched at an angle is the single commonest cause of the slow drip that appears a day later.

Worked example: what actually comes out

Bucket in, cupboard emptied, old towel down. Both rings unscrewed by hand — top first, then bottom — and the U-bend lifts out. Half a litre of grey water into the bucket, followed by the blockage: a grey-white plug of hardened fat the size of a walnut, with coffee grounds and a lemon pip set into it. The trap is scraped out with an old toothbrush, rinsed in a second bucket rather than in the sink above it, and refitted, washers checked, by hand only. Then the test that matters: taps run for a full minute with a dry hand held under each joint. Bucket stays overnight anyway — that is how you catch a slow drip.

Checklist

- ☐ Bucket in position and the cupboard emptied before anything is unscrewed
- ☐ Rings loosened and retightened by hand only — overtightening cracks plastic threads
- ☐ Trap cleaned out away from the sink, not rinsed down the drain you just cleared
- ☐ Rubber washers inspected, seated flat and the correct way round
- ☐ Taps run for a full minute with a dry hand held under every joint
- ☐ Bucket left underneath overnight to catch a slow drip

Exercises

1. Take your trap off and put it back on, even if the sink is not blocked — do it once when it does not matter.
2. Photograph the washers before removing them, so you know which way round they go.
3. Check every joint under the sink for old water marks, which show where it has leaked before.

CHAPTER 4 OF 5 · DAY 4 · 30 MIN

The Snake, and Knowing Where to Stop

> **Outcome:** "I can use a drain snake on the pipe beyond the trap, and I know the point where I stop."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Measure the distance from your sink to the nearest outside wall. That is roughly how far your own pipework runs, and roughly how far you can reach.

The minimum you need to know

If the trap was clean, the blockage is in the pipe beyond it — the horizontal run heading for the main drain. A **drain snake** (or hand auger) is a flexible coil you feed in and crank. Two rules make it work rather than make things worse: feed it in with the trap removed so you go straight into the waste pipe rather than fighting round the bend, and when you meet resistance, **crank and pull back repeatedly** rather than shoving. You are trying to hook the blockage and drag it out, not ram it further down where it becomes someone else's problem and a bigger bill. For a bathroom basin, a cheap plastic hair-grabber strip does the same job better, because bathroom blockages sit within the first few centimetres. **The stopping points are the important part of this chapter.** Call a plumber if more than one fitting is affected, if the snake meets a hard stop that will not move, if water backs up elsewhere while you work, if there is a sewage smell, or if you have already spent an hour. A blockage you force deeper costs more to clear than the one you started with.

Worked example: a snake that worked, and one that shouldn't have been used

Bathroom basin, still slow after the trap came out clean. Hair-grabber strip down the plughole, twisted, pulled: a matted rope of hair and soap the length of a finger. Sink drains instantly, for about two euros, and the snake was never needed. Second case, kitchen: trap clean, snake cranking freely for a metre, then a solid stop that will not shift — and at the same moment the washing machine's outlet starts backing up. Two signals at once mean the blockage is in the shared run past both fittings, so the snake goes away and the phone comes out.

Checklist

- ☐ Trap removed before feeding the snake in, so it goes straight into the waste pipe
- ☐ Cranked and pulled back repeatedly rather than pushed hard
- ☐ Hair-grabber tried first on a bathroom basin — cheaper and better suited
- ☐ Stopped immediately if a second fitting started backing up
- ☐ Stopped at a hard immovable obstruction, and after about an hour regardless — a forced blockage costs more than the original
- ☐ Chemical drain cleaners avoided throughout, especially before plunging or opening the trap

Exercises

1. Price a hand auger and a hair-grabber strip, and decide which your home actually needs.
2. Write your stopping conditions on a note and keep it with your tools.
3. Find and save the number of a local plumber before you need one, so the decision to stop is easy.

CHAPTER 5 OF 5 · DAY 4 · 20 MIN

Keeping It Clear

> **Outcome:** "I have a routine that stops the same blockage coming back."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Look at what you pour down your kitchen sink after cooking tonight. That single habit is the cause of most repeat blockages.

The minimum you need to know

Blockages are built, not suffered. The kitchen rule is one sentence: **fat, oil and grease do not go down the sink**, in any quantity, ever — not even hot and runny, because they cool a metre down the pipe and set there. Pour them into an old jar and bin it once it is full. The same goes for coffee grounds, rice, pasta and anything starchy, all of which swell. In the bathroom, a **plughole strainer** costing a euro or two catches hair before it ever reaches the trap, and emptying it weekly is the entire maintenance routine. Once a month, run the hot tap hard for a minute in each sink to flush the film that builds on the pipe walls. And treat a **slow drain as an early warning**, not as a minor annoyance: a sink that takes twice as long as it used to is a blockage half-formed, and dealing with it now is a plunger, while dealing with it in a month is a bucket and a trap.

Worked example: the jar under the sink

A household that had blocked the kitchen sink twice in eighteen months changes exactly two habits. An empty jam jar lives under the sink; roasting-tin fat, the oil from a pan, and the grease skimmed off a stock all go into it, and the jar goes in the bin when it is full — about once a month. Coffee grounds go into the food waste instead of down the plughole. Nothing else changes: no chemicals, no monthly ritual beyond running the hot tap hard for a minute on the first of the month. Two years later the sink has not blocked again. The instructive part is what was tried before that did not work — a bottle of caustic drain cleaner every few weeks, which cleared each blockage slowly, damaged the trap seal, and did nothing at all about the fat still going down the plughole every Sunday.

Checklist

- ☐ Fat, oil and grease collected in a jar and binned — never poured down the sink
- ☐ Coffee grounds, rice and pasta kept out of the drain
- ☐ Plughole strainer fitted in every bathroom sink and emptied weekly
- ☐ Hot tap run hard for a minute in each sink once a month
- ☐ A drain that has become slow treated immediately, not tolerated
- ☐ Chemical drain cleaners kept out of the house — they damage pipes and make every later fix more dangerous

Exercises

1. Put a jar under the sink tonight and start using it for cooking fat.
2. Fit a strainer in every bathroom plughole.
3. Time how long each sink takes to empty and write it down — that is your baseline for spotting the next one early.

You've completed this guide.

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