Cold Weather Precautions for Your Water Lines

Eliminate sources of cold air near water lines by repairing broken windows, insulating walls, closing off crawl spaces and eliminating drafts near doors.

•Know the location of your water shut-off valve and test it regularly. If a pipe breaks, you won't want to have to find it then or, worse, wait for someone to arrive at your place to find it for you. In most single-family homes, the shut-off valve is in the basement or the crawlspace, on a wall facing the street.

•Insulate pipes that may be vulnerable to the cold or have caused problems before. Pipes close to exterior walls or in unheated basements or crawlspaces can be wrapped with pieces of insulation. Don't overlook pipes near windows, which can quickly freeze. For particularly difficult pipes, consult a professional on how to select and apply heat tape.

•For outside water meters, keep the lid to the meter pit closed tightly and let any snow that falls cover it. Snow acts as insulation so don't disturb it. Be sure the meter box is not broken, missing or out of place. Report all broken or missing covers.

•If you didn't get your sprinkler system off and drained this year, make sure to check for leaks when you turn on the system next spring.

•When should homeowners be alert to the danger of freezing pipes? That depends, but in southern states and other areas where freezing weather is the exception rather than the rule (and where houses often do not provide adequate built-in protection), the temperature alert threshold is 20°F.

When temperatures fall below freezing...

•Open cabinet doors to expose pipes to warmer room temperatures to help keep them from freezing.

•If you have an attached garage, keep its doors shut. Occasionally, plumbing is routed through this unheated space, leaving it vulnerable to winter's worst.

•When Temperatures are below 10 degrees and pipes are in unheated areas or are otherwise vulnerable to freezing, crack a faucet furthest from the place where your water enters the house. A very slow drip will keep water molecules moving, reducing the chance that pipes will freeze. The cost of the extra water is low compared to the cost to repair a broken pipe.

•Keep your thermostat set above 55 degrees when leaving your house or business for several days.

When your pipes freeze...

•Shut off the water immediately. Don't attempt to thaw frozen pipes unless the water is shut off. Freezing can often cause unseen cracks in pipes or joints.

•Apply heat to the frozen pipe by warming the air around it, or by applying heat directly to a pipe. You can use a hair dryer, space heater, or hot water. Be sure not to leave space heaters unattended, and avoid the use of kerosene heaters or open flames. Always be careful of the potential for electric shock in and around standing water.

•Remember: When thawing things, slower is better. Pipes warmed too fast may break anyway.

•Once the pipes have thawed, turn the water back on slowly and check for cracks and leaks