

OTTAWA PRO PLUMBING

Seasonal Plumbing

Frozen pipes, outdoor taps, and winterizing an
Ottawa home

9 Expert Answers from Construction Brain

ottawaplumbingpro.ca/construction-brain

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Q1

How do I thaw frozen pipes safely?

Frozen pipes are a serious winter emergency in Ottawa, and acting quickly — but carefully — can prevent a burst pipe and thousands of dollars in water damage.

First, locate the frozen section. Turn on the faucet the pipe serves. If little or no water comes out, trace the pipe back toward exterior walls, unheated spaces (crawl spaces, garages, under cabinets on outside walls), or anywhere insulation may be lacking. These are the most common freeze points in Ottawa homes during our harsh winters.

Before you start thawing, turn off the main water supply valve. This is critical — if the pipe has already cracked from ice expansion, you won't know until the ice melts. Having the water off prevents a sudden flood when that happens. Your main shutoff is typically near the water meter, often in the basement.

Safe thawing methods include a hair dryer on low-to-medium heat, an electric heating pad wrapped around the pipe, or warm towels soaked in hot water. Work from the faucet end back toward the frozen section — this lets water and steam escape as the ice melts. Never use an open flame, propane torch, or heat gun. These can damage pipes, ignite nearby materials, and create a serious fire hazard.

In Ottawa, temperatures regularly drop to -20°C or colder, which means pipes in poorly insulated areas can freeze fast. If you can't locate the frozen section, or if it's inside a wall or inaccessible area, stop and call a plumber. Attempting to thaw pipes inside walls without proper equipment risks both fire and flood.

Once thawed, slowly turn the water back on and watch carefully for any drips or spraying water that would indicate a crack. Even a small crack can release hundreds of litres of water quickly.

For prevention going forward, consider adding pipe insulation sleeves to exposed pipes (available at any Ottawa hardware store), keeping cabinet doors open under sinks on exterior walls during cold snaps, and maintaining your home above 15°C even when away. If a section of your home repeatedly freezes, a licensed plumber can reroute or properly insulate that pipe run.

If you've had a freeze or want a professional assessment of your vulnerable pipes before next winter, Ottawa Pro Plumbing offers free consultations — it's much cheaper than dealing with a burst pipe cleanup.

Q2

What pipes are most likely to freeze?

Pipes in unheated areas like crawl spaces, basements, and exterior walls are most vulnerable to freezing, especially those made of copper or PEX that carry water rather than drain waste.

Location is the biggest factor in pipe freezing risk. Pipes running through uninsulated crawl spaces, unheated basements, or within exterior walls face the greatest danger. Kitchen and bathroom pipes on outside walls are particularly vulnerable, especially if there's inadequate insulation behind them. Pipes in attached garages, near foundation walls, or in areas where cold air can infiltrate are also high-risk zones.

Copper pipes freeze more readily than other materials because metal conducts cold efficiently. However, PEX and even older galvanized steel pipes can freeze too. The key difference is that PEX has some flexibility and may not burst immediately when frozen, while rigid copper pipes often crack or split when water expands inside them. Interestingly, hot water pipes sometimes freeze before cold water pipes because hot water systems may have less residual flow.

In Ottawa's climate, pipes typically start freezing when temperatures drop below -10°C for extended periods, particularly during those brutal January and February cold snaps we experience. Pipes closest to exterior walls or in poorly insulated areas can freeze even when indoor temperatures seem comfortable. Wind chill and air infiltration around the foundation can create surprisingly cold microclimates around vulnerable pipes.

Prevention is crucial because burst pipes can cause thousands of dollars in water damage within hours. Keep cabinet doors open under sinks during cold snaps to allow warm air circulation, maintain consistent heating even when away, and consider having vulnerable pipes insulated by a professional. If you suspect a pipe is frozen (no water flow, frost on exposed pipes), shut off the main water valve and call for emergency service immediately.

For an assessment of vulnerable pipes in your Ottawa home and professional insulation solutions, Ottawa Pro Plumbing offers free consultations to help prevent costly freeze damage.

Q3

Should I leave faucets dripping in cold weather?

Yes, leaving faucets dripping during extremely cold weather can prevent frozen pipes, but it's only necessary when temperatures drop well below freezing for extended periods - typically when it's colder than -15°C overnight in Ottawa.

When to let faucets drip: Focus on faucets connected to pipes in unheated areas like exterior walls, basements, crawl spaces, or garages. You only need a very slow drip - about one drop every few seconds. This small amount of moving water prevents ice formation that could burst your pipes. Both hot and cold taps should drip slightly, as

both supply lines can freeze.

Ottawa's climate considerations: Our winters regularly see temperatures below -20°C, making pipe freezing a real concern. Homes built before modern insulation standards are particularly vulnerable. Pay special attention to pipes on north-facing walls or in older basements where insulation may be inadequate. The City of Ottawa typically sees the highest risk of frozen pipes during January and February cold snaps.

Better prevention methods include insulating exposed pipes, sealing air leaks around pipe penetrations, and keeping cabinet doors open under sinks during cold nights to allow warm air circulation. If you're leaving town during winter, never set your thermostat below 15°C, and consider having someone check your home daily during extreme cold.

When pipes do freeze, shut off the main water supply immediately and call a professional. Attempting to thaw pipes with open flames or high heat can cause pipe damage or fires. If you're experiencing repeated freezing issues, a licensed plumber can identify vulnerable areas and recommend permanent insulation solutions.

For homes with chronic freezing problems, Ottawa Pro Plumbing can assess your pipe layout and recommend insulation upgrades or pipe relocation to prevent future issues.

Q4

Can pipes freeze in one night?

Yes, pipes can absolutely freeze in just one night if temperatures drop low enough and the pipes are in vulnerable locations. In Ottawa's climate, this is a real concern during our harsh winter months.

How quickly pipes freeze depends on several factors. Exposed pipes in unheated areas like crawl spaces, basements, or exterior walls can freeze when temperatures hit -6°C to -10°C for several hours. The smaller the pipe diameter, the faster it freezes - half-inch copper pipes are particularly vulnerable. Pipes with little or no water flow are also at higher risk since moving water takes longer to freeze.

Location matters significantly in Ottawa homes. Pipes most likely to freeze overnight include those in unheated garages, crawl spaces, rim joists, and along exterior walls with poor insulation. Kitchen sinks on outside walls and bathroom pipes in older homes are common trouble spots. Even pipes in heated areas can freeze if there's a power outage or heating system failure during extremely cold nights.

Prevention is crucial because frozen pipes often lead to bursts when they thaw, causing thousands in water damage. Keep cabinet doors open under sinks on exterior walls, let faucets drip slightly during extreme cold, and maintain consistent heating. If you're going away, never set your thermostat below 15°C .

If you suspect frozen pipes, don't ignore the warning signs like no water flow or strange sounds. Turn off your main water supply immediately if you hear pipes banging or see any signs of cracking. For emergency pipe thawing or burst pipe repair, Ottawa Pro Plumbing offers 24/7 service to prevent costly water damage to your home.

Q5

How do I know if my pipes have frozen?

Frozen pipes typically show clear warning signs: no water flow from faucets, unusual sounds in walls, or visible frost on exposed pipes. The sooner you identify frozen pipes, the better chance you have of preventing them from bursting.

Water flow issues are usually the first sign. Turn on faucets throughout your home - if only a trickle comes out or nothing at all, you likely have frozen pipes. Start with faucets on exterior walls or in unheated areas like basements, crawl spaces, or garages, as these freeze first. You might also hear unusual sounds like banging, gurgling, or whistling when you turn on taps.

Visual inspection can reveal frozen sections. Look for frost or ice on exposed pipes, especially in unheated areas. Pipes may appear swollen or bulged if ice has formed inside. Check areas where pipes run along exterior walls, in unheated basements, or anywhere pipes are exposed to cold air. In Ottawa's harsh winters, pipes in poorly insulated areas are particularly vulnerable.

Temperature patterns also provide clues. If your home has heat but certain areas feel unusually cold, pipes in those zones may be frozen. Kitchen and bathroom faucets on north-facing walls often freeze first during Ottawa's cold snaps.

Act quickly if you suspect frozen pipes. Shut off your main water supply to prevent flooding if pipes burst. Open faucets to relieve pressure and allow water to flow once thawing begins. Never use open flames or high heat - this can damage pipes or create safety hazards. If you can't locate the frozen section or if pipes have already burst, this requires immediate professional attention.

For emergency frozen pipe situations in Ottawa, we provide 24/7 service to prevent costly water damage. Want to discuss your specific situation? We offer free consultations to assess your plumbing and prevent future freezing issues.

Q6

When should I shut off my outdoor water in Ottawa?

You should shut off your outdoor water by mid to late October in Ottawa, typically before the first hard frost which usually occurs between October 15th and November 1st. The key is to complete this task before nighttime temperatures consistently drop below -2°C (28°F).

The timing is critical because Ottawa's climate can bring sudden temperature drops in fall. Even a brief freeze can cause water in outdoor pipes and faucets to expand, leading to burst pipes and costly repairs. Once water freezes in your outdoor plumbing, the damage is often already done - you might not discover cracked pipes until spring when you turn the water back on.

In Ottawa, most homes have a shutoff valve inside the basement or crawl space that controls water flow to outdoor faucets. After closing this valve, you'll need to open the outdoor faucets to drain any remaining water from the lines. Some homes also have drain plugs or bleeder valves that should be opened to ensure complete drainage. If you have an irrigation system, it should be professionally blown out with compressed air, as simply draining the lines isn't sufficient for sprinkler systems.

Don't forget about garden hoses and attachments - these should be disconnected, drained, and stored indoors. Water trapped in hoses can freeze and damage both the hose and the faucet it's connected to. Any outdoor water features, decorative fountains, or pool equipment should also be winterized according to manufacturer instructions.

If you're unsure about your home's outdoor water shutoff system or discover leaks when turning the water back on in spring, Ottawa Pro Plumbing can help identify and repair any freeze damage. We also offer fall plumbing inspections to ensure your home is properly winterized before Ottawa's harsh winter arrives.

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What is the cost of frozen pipe repair?

Frozen pipe repair costs in Ottawa typically range from \$200-\$800 depending on the extent of damage and location of the pipes. If the pipes haven't burst, thawing services usually cost \$200-\$400, but if freezing caused pipe bursts, repairs can reach \$500-\$1,500 or more.

Simple thawing services are the most affordable option when pipes are frozen but haven't burst yet. Licensed plumbers use specialized heating equipment to safely thaw pipes without causing damage. This typically costs \$200-\$400 depending on how many pipes are affected and their accessibility.

Burst pipe repairs are significantly more expensive because freezing water expands and can crack or split pipes. Repairing burst pipes involves cutting out damaged sections, installing new pipe, and potentially opening walls or ceilings to access the damage. Basic burst pipe repairs start around \$500, but can easily reach \$1,000-\$1,500 if multiple pipes are affected or if they're in hard-to-reach locations like inside walls.

Ottawa's harsh winters make frozen pipes a common emergency, especially in older homes with poor insulation or pipes in exterior walls, crawl spaces, and unheated basements. Emergency service calls during freezing weather typically include a \$150-\$250 service fee plus repair costs. Water damage from burst pipes can add thousands in restoration costs, making prevention crucial.

Prevention is always cheaper than repair. Keep your heat on, open cabinet doors under sinks during cold snaps, and let faucets drip slightly during extreme cold. If you suspect frozen pipes, shut off your main water valve immediately and call a licensed plumber - attempting to thaw pipes yourself with torches or high heat can cause dangerous pipe bursts.

For emergency frozen pipe service in Ottawa, we offer 24/7 response to minimize water damage and get your water flowing again safely.

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How do I protect outdoor plumbing in winter?

Protecting outdoor plumbing from freezing is essential in Ottawa's harsh winters - frozen pipes can burst and cause thousands in water damage when they thaw in spring.

Start with your outdoor faucets and hose bibs. Disconnect and drain all garden hoses completely, then store them indoors or in an unheated garage. Even a small amount of water left in a hose can freeze and back up into your home's plumbing. Next, shut off the interior water supply valve to each outdoor faucet - these are typically located in your basement near where the pipe exits to the exterior. After closing the valve, go outside and open the faucet to drain any remaining water from the line.

For pipes in unheated areas like crawl spaces, garages, or exterior walls, insulation is your best defense. Foam pipe insulation sleeves are inexpensive and effective for most situations. Pay special attention to pipes near exterior walls, in unheated basements, or anywhere cold air can reach them. In extremely cold areas, consider heat tape or cables designed for pipes, but these must be installed according to manufacturer instructions to prevent fire hazards.

Ottawa's climate demands extra attention to foundation and basement areas. Ensure basement windows are properly sealed and consider adding extra insulation around pipes near the foundation. If you have a sump pump, make sure the discharge line won't freeze - a frozen discharge can cause basement flooding during winter thaws.

For extended winter absences, consider having your water main shut off and pipes drained by a professional. This prevents any possibility of freeze damage while you're away. Keep your home heated to at least 15°C (60°F) even when vacant, and have someone check on the property regularly.

If you discover a frozen pipe, act quickly but safely. Never use open flames or high heat - instead, use a hair dryer or heating pad to gradually warm the pipe starting from the faucet end. If you can't locate the freeze or if a pipe has burst, shut off your main water supply immediately and call for emergency plumbing service.

For a comprehensive winter plumbing inspection or to install freeze-proof fixtures, Ottawa Pro Plumbing can help ensure your home is protected before the deep freeze arrives.

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Q9

How do I prepare my plumbing for winter in Ottawa?

Start winterizing your Ottawa plumbing by mid-October to prevent costly freeze damage during our harsh winters. The key is protecting exposed pipes and ensuring proper drainage before temperatures drop below -10°C consistently.

Indoor pipe protection is your first priority. Insulate any pipes in unheated areas like basements, crawl spaces, garages, and along exterior walls. Foam pipe insulation from hardware stores works well and costs under \$50 for most homes. Pay special attention to pipes near windows, in rim joist areas, and anywhere you feel cold drafts. Keep cabinet doors open under sinks during cold snaps to let warm air circulate around pipes.

Outdoor preparations prevent the most expensive winter damage. Shut off water to exterior taps at the indoor shutoff valve, then open the outdoor faucets to drain completely. Remove and store garden hoses - even a small amount of water left in a hose can freeze and crack the tap. If you have an irrigation system, it needs professional blowout service by late October. Don't forget to insulate or heat your water meter if it's in an unheated area.

Ottawa's climate demands extra attention to basement and foundation areas where pipes commonly freeze. Our temperature swings from +5°C to -25°C can cause repeated freeze-thaw cycles that stress pipes. Many Ottawa homes built before 1980 have vulnerable copper pipes that need extra insulation. The City of Ottawa recommends maintaining at least 13°C in basements during winter.

Prevention saves thousands compared to emergency repairs. A burst pipe can cause \$5,000+ in water damage, while winterization costs under \$200 for most homes. Keep your furnace running even when away, and know where your main water shutoff is located. During extreme cold warnings (below -20°C), let faucets drip slightly to keep water moving.

If you discover vulnerable pipes or need irrigation blowout service, Ottawa Pro Plumbing can assess your home's winter readiness and handle any necessary upgrades before the deep freeze arrives.

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