

Q We have a leak from the shower in our bathroom down into the kitchen. Sometimes water falls into the room; at other times, it collects in the ceiling on the kitchen ceiling, which has become stained. We have had the shower rescaled inside and out, but this hasn't solved the problem. Our plumber is at a loss. Any ideas?

Paul Baker, Cardiff

A This is a common problem and, if you are not prepared to strip out the shower and tiles, and start again, there is an alternative. Be warned, though: it is messy, needs two people and relies on you having a plasterboard ceiling in the kitchen.

First, work out exactly where the shower sits above the kitchen. Carefully cut out the plasterboard ceiling so you can see the base of the shower tray, the waste trap, the waste pipework and hopefully some of the hot- and cold-feed pipework above. Next, one of you must go upstairs, turn on the shower mixer, take the shower hose and direct it straight into the waste trap (nowhere else), then leave it for five minutes so the person below can see whether the trap leaks. If, during this process, you have water coming from anywhere else (running down the wall, say), you can assume the waste trap is not the culprit. It's the shower mixer and pipework, which will leak down the wall behind the tiles, rather than beneath the waste trap.

Should there be no sign of a leak, direct the shower head around the seal between the tray and the tiles, then leave the water on for five minutes, keeping it pointed just at the seal. If you still see no leaks, spray around the tiles and, again, watch for leaks. You will have to replace a portion of the ceiling afterwards, but by doing my method, we always find out where a leak is.

Billy Heyman, managing director of the design and build company, BTL Property; btlpropertyltd.co.uk

Q Two years ago, we split a large amount of red wine on an oatmeal-coloured woollen carpet. We soaked most of it up, then my wife put a bag full of salt on it to further absorb the liquid. This worked brilliantly – no sign of a stain. However, when the weather is humid, the carpet develops a damp patch where the salt was applied. Why is this, and how can we fix it?

Mark Hollingworth, via email

A Salt is the best option for a red-wine stain if you treat it straightaway. What appears to be happening with your carpet is a process called wicking. Often, when we remove a stain, it is only from the top fibres in the carpet; if the liquid/salt has gone deeper, to the carpet backing, it can resurface in the top fibres: this is wicking. As your carpet is wool, which is absorbent, it has likely held on to some salt, and wicking could occur when it gets humid. Having risen closer to the surface, the sticky salt may attract dirt or hold moisture, creating a damp patch. This suggests a stain is still present.

We recommend a deep clean with a professional machine to ensure the salt that has gone deep into the pile is fully removed. It may take a couple of goes.

Wayne Perrey and Steph Bron, co-directors of DIY Doers; thediydoers.com

Q Our family recently moved to a new neighbourhood and, in order to make friends with the neighbours, we invited a few local families for dinner. It was a lovely evening, but it went horribly wrong. We served chocolate mousse for dessert and, later that night, everyone became violently ill with food poisoning – our family and, by all accounts, the guests,

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too. Now I feel mortified walking down the street. What should I do? Is there any point in trying to make friends after this, or should we sell up?

Anonymous, west London

A Ah, yes, the modern desire to be liked by everyone has backfired, however admirable your intentions. I think moving away from your new, salmonella-odded neighbourhood is a little extreme. I suggest sending handwritten notes to each of them, apologising for your crucial lapse and stressing that it was an accident and has never happened before. Don't say anything like "I hope we can still be friends" – let your sick neighbours decide that, and at their own speed. Time is a great healer. While it may take six or eight months (maybe longer), if you smile, wave and keep your lawn as neat and tidy as possible for the foreseeable future, then they should come round. And who knows, you could host some of them for another dinner, eventually (although perhaps find a caterer's number).

William Hanson is a leading etiquette coach; williamhanson.co.uk



QUESTION OF THE WEEK

Q Help! For five years, we have been fighting a rat invasion. They are in the cavities and we hear scratching all the time. Cameras sent down drains find nothing. We have taken the insulation out of the loft and put metal netting where the walls meet the roof. We have opened up the interior cavities and placed metal netting and traps inside them. We had "blown" insulation put in cavities four years ago, but the rats have been eating this. We have dug round the waste pipes, but found no gaps. We have put in gutter guards and placed wood behind gutters to stop them getting up walls. We have bait boxes around perimeter of the house, motion sensor lights and electronic deterrents. We have traps.

We have contacted the developer, a national housebuilder, as we feel the footings may not have been dug properly. The property was empty for five years before we bought it – the previous owners stayed for barely a year. They obviously knew about the problem and left no forwarding address. We feel the housebuilder has a duty of care. What do you do now?

Mr and Mrs Byrne, Cheshire

A It's hard to give advice without assessing your property, but the first thing to do with any rodent problem is to address environmental factors, says David Cross, head of Rentokil Pest Control, a technical training academy (rentokil.co.uk). Ensure that food and rubbish are kept in sealed containers.

Rats need daily access to water, which is hard to get in a domestic wall

cavity. This can force them into a transient existence between internal and external areas unless they can access it another way, such as via soil stacks or open drains. If you can locate their water source and block it, they can't survive. Speak to neighbours, too, as the rats may be entering via a shared wall.

Seal holes bigger than 1cm with a mix of caulk and steel wool. As a last resort, apply rodenticides in wall cavities. But unless the point of entry is identified, the rats will likely return.

As you bought the property from a third party, you have no simple claim against the builder, says Mark Fletcher, an associate at Russell-Cooke Solicitors (russell-cooke.co.uk). The Defective Premises Act 1972 imposes a duty on residential builders to ensure the dwelling is fit for habitation when completed. This duty is owed to any person who acquires an interest in the dwelling. Even if you could show that defects rendered your home unfit for habitation, action must be taken within six years of building completion.

It's worth checking the terms of the new-build warranty that should have been obtained when the home was originally built. Yet most of these last for only 10 years, and the types of defects they cover are limited.

You could make a claim against the vendor if you can prove that they provided inaccurate information, or any surveyors and/or solicitors if they failed to act properly. But you will need to move quickly: there is usually a limitation period of six years from the date on which the cause of action arises.

TOP TIPS

The dishwasher is a lifesaver, but it, too, needs cleaning. Here's how to keep it ticking over.

■ To stop limescale and soap scum building up, run a cup of white vinegar through the empty machine on a normal cycle. Alternatively, use a cleaning product such as Dr Beckmann Service-It Deep Clean Dishwasher Cleaner (£3).

■ To banish any unpleasant smells, sprinkle a couple of tablespoons of bicarbonate of soda in the bottom of the machine before you run it.

■ Clean the spray arms regularly, using a bowl of hot water and washing-up liquid.

Run water through the hoses in the spray arms to make sure they're not obstructed by food debris – blockages can be cleaned by poking a toothpick through the holes.

■ Clean the filters as frequently as possible, giving them a scrub in a bowl of hot water and washing-up liquid.

■ goodhousekeeping.co.uk/institute



Home Help

Whether you're driven to distraction by an invasion of rats or a dinner-party poisoning, our experts are here to offer advice