

EARTH TALK™

Questions & Answers About Our Environment

Dear EarthTalk: Is it true that the bathroom is where over half of our household water usage takes place? What are some ways to take a bite out of that?

— Shelby McIntyre, Chico, CA

Yes indeed, some 60 percent of our household indoor water usage happens in the bathroom. As such, updating old leaky fixtures and changing a few basic habits could go a long way to not only saving fresh water, an increasingly precious resource, but also money.

Undoubtedly, the toilet is the biggest water hog in the bathroom. Those made before 1993 use up to eight gallons of water per flush, five times what modern toilets use. "It's a good idea to replace pre-1993 toilets if you can," says Patty Kim of National Geographic's *Green Guide*.

FYI, usually a toilet's manufacture date is stamped under the lid if you want to check how old it is.

If it is older and you can't or don't want to upgrade it, Kim recommends

rescuing a two liter soda bottle from the recycling bin and filling it partially with some water and sand or pebbles and then putting it into your toilet's tank, where it will take up space and force your toilet to use less water every flush.

Or get a Toilet Tank Bank for less than two bucks; it hangs in your toilet tank and displaces almost a gallon of water to save water on every flush.

Plumbing leaks account for some 14 percent of the total water usage in an average U.S. home. Toilets are often a major culprit. Kim recommends testing your toilet by putting 5-10 drops of food coloring into the tank, then put the lid back on but don't flush.

Check back in 15 minutes or so to see if any of the colored water leaked down into the bowl. If so, you have a water-wasting leak, and it might finally be time to replace that aging toilet after all.

The EarthEasy website reports that replacing an older 18 liter per flush toilet with an ultra-low volume (ULV) 6 liter flush model "represents a 70 percent saving in water flushed and will cut indoor water use by about 30 percent."

The shower can also be problematic as a water-waster, especially if the showerhead in question was made before new regulations went into effect in 1992 mandating lower flow.

Kim says you can check to see if your shower head is older or not by turning the shower on full blast and catching its output for two minutes in

a bucket. If the bucket is overflowing, then your showerhead is an older, more wasteful model.

Newer low flow showerheads won't come anywhere near to filling the bucket after two minutes. A new showerhead costs around \$10 and is a great investment because you can save water and money with every ensuing shower.

Regardless of whether or not you have a newer showerhead, you can save more water by turning off the shower to soap up, then turning it back on to rinse.

Eartheasy reminds us that even with a new showerhead, even a moderately short shower can still use between 20 and 40 gallons of water. But that's nothing compared to a bathtub, which can hold as much as 50-60 gallons of water.

Additional pearls of wisdom in regard to reducing bathroom water waste include turning off the faucet while brushing teeth. Better yet, fill up a glass with just enough water to rinse after brushing.

Likewise for shaving (gentlemen), stop up the sink with a little warm water in it and wiggle your razor around in the basin between strokes. And if you suspect your faucet may be spraying harder than it needs to, unscrew the aerator tip where the water comes out and take it into a hardware store for a more stingy replacement.

CONTACTS: The Green Guide, <http://environment.nationalgeo->



Some 60 percent of our household indoor water usage happens in the bathroom. A shower, even with a low-flow shower head, can use up to 40 gallons of water. (Photo courtesy of Hemera Collection/Thinkstock)

graphic.com/environment/green-guide/; EarthEasy, www.eartheasy.com.

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