

How To Choose a Plumbing Contractor

By Carol Turner

It's never a good idea to skimp on something as important to your family's comfort, safety and health as plumbing. Paying a higher rate for experience and professionalism could end up saving you money if the job is handled expertly. Trusting a complicated job to someone who charges a low rate but lacks experience in handling tougher jobs could end up costing you more money if the repair or installation is not handled properly.

When you call a plumber discuss the nature of your problem and request an estimate. Depending on the seriousness and difficulty, you may get an estimate over the phone, but most plumbers prefer to assess the situation at the job site before giving a quote. Most will give you a detailed rundown of the charges before they begin the actual work.

Before you hire a plumber, ask for his license number. Any licensed plumber should give it to you without hesitation. However, if he balks or makes an excuse for not having it available, it's a good sign you might want to hire someone else.

When you make an appointment with a plumber ask for a time frame on when you can expect the plumber to show up. Many will give you a window such as "between 10 a.m. and noon", and call you when they are on their way. Also ask for an estimate of how long the job should take. Clearing a drain usually takes no longer than 30 minutes but sometimes a small job can escalate into a larger one if an unexpected problem arises.

Try to be organized before you call the plumber. Make a list of items that need attention and arrange to have them all checked out in one visit. If you are not sure what is causing the problem, make a list of symptoms that will help the plumber determine what type of repair he may have to deal with. Clear the area as much as possible to give the plumber adequate work space.

If you need to hire a plumber for a bathroom or kitchen remodel, talk to at least three plumbers and get their suggestions. Review their recommendations and quotes carefully and check out their references before making a final decision on which one gets the job. You can also check on a plumber's reputation by consulting with your local Better Business Bureau to see if any complaints are on file. Check that your plumber has liability and workmen's compensation insurance. This is particularly important for large jobs, remodels, and repairs on older homes or damaged properties.

Should you find that you need new bathroom fixtures such as a toilet, sink or faucet, most plumbers will be happy to sell them to you but you can save money by shopping around for the best prices at home improvement stores and hiring a plumber to install them. Generally it's best to ask your plumber to recommend brands and models before you shop. Buying a fixture that your plumber has installed before will help alleviate any possible installation problems. If you plan to do a bathroom remodel, your plumber may be able to get an industry discount on quantity fixtures or refer you to a supplier that you might not find as easily on your own. In this case it may be best to let the plumber buy the fixtures and set a price for the purchase and installation. Make sure that model numbers of any fixtures that have been installed are visible on your receipt or contract.

Talk to your plumber about installing water-saving toilets and showerheads. Investing in updated water-saving units can save you money and reduce repairs in the long run. Discuss the possibility of a service agreement. Some plumbers offer periodic checkups to make sure your plumbing is operating efficiently. If you have an ongoing problem such as tree roots, your plumber may recommend treatment solutions to flush down the toilet every few months to help eliminate the roots.

Ask your plumber for suggestions on how to prevent future problems. Maintaining your drains properly is one of the most important preventive steps you can take. There are numerous products on the market that are designed to reduce grease buildup in the kitchen, and you can use a screen trap to prevent hair from clogging bathroom pipes. Be careful about foods that go into the kitchen drain and don't allow children to play with toys near toilets.

Just as you select a doctor for regular preventive checkups, it's a smart idea to choose a plumber before a serious problem develops. Ask your friends and associates for the names of plumbers they would recommend. Watch for local plumbing contractors advertising in the paper. Call their office ask questions about your concerns. Compare hourly rates of several plumbers and take into consideration their skills, experience, hours, and specialties when making your choice.