

Get a grip on pipes' annoying clicking noise

By BILL GARWOOD
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Q: Our house was built in 2000 — normal construction, two story. When we turn on the hot water in any of the bathrooms, the pipe makes a rhythmic clicking noise that starts about four to six seconds after you turn on the hot water and continues until the water is turned off. The clicking noise occurs about every one to two seconds and can be heard in the walls. One person on a Web discussion said it was the expansion of copper pipe when heated with the hot water and that there needs to be an expansion joint installed. This makes sense, but the faucet closest to the water heater (within 20 feet) does the same thing. The water heater was replaced six months ago (leak in bottom) and the clicking was with the prior one also. There is an expansion tank on top of the water heater. Any suggestions? Thanks in advance for your help.

A: There are several reasons why plumbing pipes make noises. Fortunately, yours sounds like one of the easier ones to remedy. I believe the noise you are hearing is exactly what you learned in your Web discussion. When the hot water flows through the pipes, they expand. If the pipes are in contact with wood framing, the expansion will actually cause the pipe to rub against the wood. This rubbing will result in the "rhythmic clicking noise" you describe. If you have access to the pipes, the solution is relatively easy. First, determine where the rubbing is taking place. Once you have accomplished this, install rubber pipe insulation around the pipes so that they do not contact the wood framing. If there is not room for the pipe insulation, any soft material that creates a joint between the pipes and the wood will work. If your pipes are not accessible, you have a bigger problem. If the noise is extremely annoying, you always have the option of removing finished materials (floors, wallboard, ceilings) to find its location. If this sounds too extreme, you can learn to live with the noise, taking comfort in the fact that there is no harm being done to your pipes.

Mildew in laundry room

Q: We have a mildew problem in our laundry room. Where the washer hoses drain, the entire area is covered in mildew. Not only is it a hard area to clean, but it keeps coming back. What can we do to stop the problem?

A: The first thing you want to do is make sure that there are no leaks in the washing machine supply or drain pipes. A leak, even a small one, will keep the wall behind the washing machine moist. Since fungus (mildew) spores are always in the air, moisture from a leak that gets into the drywall behind the washer creates a perfect environment for the fungus. Determining that there are no leaks can be easy if you have access under the washing machine. You can simply watch a load drain and look for leaks. Without access, it may require a plumber to ensure against leaking. Even without water leaks, the area behind your washing machine is a dark, damp place ideal for fungus growth.

Once you are sure that there are no leaks in the pipes, you can take steps to solve the problem.

You will have to disconnect the supply pipes and move the washer out from the wall. Once you have access to the wall, you can clean the mildew. Due to health risks the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency does not recommend using bleach or bleach-containing products to clean mold and mildew. Instead, they recommend simply cleaning the surface with soap and water. If you are careful, you can try a solution of bleach and water, three parts water to one part bleach. Scrub the affected area with a soft-bristle brush until the mildew is gone. Once the area has dried, repaint it using paint with a fungicide additive. These paints are available at paint and hardware stores. The fungicide in the paint should help keep the mildew from returning. You might also consider leaving the washing machine a little farther away from the wall to allow some airflow behind it.

For more information on mold, visit the EPA Web site www.epa.gov/mold.