

OTTAWA BATHROOMS

Troubleshooting

Diagnosing leaks, mould, drainage, and other
bathroom problems

12 Expert Answers from Construction Brain

ottawabathrooms.ca/construction-brain

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Q1

Why does my toilet wobble?

A wobbly toilet is almost always caused by a failed wax ring seal or loose floor bolts — and it's important to fix it promptly before water damage occurs beneath your floor.

The most common cause is loose closet bolts. These are the two bolts (called "closet bolts" or "Johnny bolts") that anchor your toilet to the floor flange. Over time, the plastic nuts can loosen or the bolts can corrode, allowing the toilet to rock. Sometimes this is a simple fix — tightening the nuts carefully (without overtightening, which can crack the porcelain base) can solve the problem immediately.

The second major cause is a damaged or compressed wax ring. The wax ring creates a watertight seal between the toilet and the drain flange in your floor. If the toilet has been rocking for a while, the wax ring is likely already compromised. A failed wax ring means sewer gases can enter your home, and water can leak beneath the floor with every flush — causing rot, mold, and subfloor damage that's expensive to repair.

A damaged floor flange is another possibility. The flange is the fitting that connects your toilet drain to the drainpipe below. If it's cracked, corroded, or sitting too low relative to your finished floor, the toilet will never sit stable. This is especially common in older Ottawa homes with cast iron plumbing.

In terms of what to do: if the toilet rocks even slightly, don't ignore it. Check whether the bolts are simply loose first. If tightening them doesn't eliminate all movement, the wax ring needs to be replaced — which means pulling the toilet, scraping the old wax, and reseating it with a new ring. This is a manageable plumbing job for a licensed contractor and typically falls in the **\$200–\$500 range** depending on whether the flange also needs repair.

If you notice any soft spots in the floor around the toilet, discolouration, or a sewage smell, there's likely water damage already underway and you'll want a contractor to assess the subfloor before simply replacing the wax ring.

For a quick assessment and repair, feel free to request a quote from **Ottawa Bathrooms** — this is exactly the kind of job we handle as part of bathroom maintenance and renovation work.

Q2

Why is my bathtub drain gurgling?

A gurgling bathtub drain is almost always a **venting problem** — air is being pulled through the water in your drain trap because the plumbing system can't breathe properly.

How Drain Venting Works

Every drain in your home has a P-trap (the curved pipe that holds water to block sewer gases). For water to drain smoothly, air needs to enter the system through a **vent pipe** that runs up through your walls and exits through your roof. When that venting is inadequate or blocked, draining water creates a vacuum and pulls air through the trap water instead — that's the gurgling sound you hear.

Common Causes

The most frequent culprit is a **blocked or partially blocked vent pipe**. Leaves, bird nests, ice (very common in Ottawa winters), or debris can clog the vent stack on your roof. A slow or partial blockage will cause gurgling before it causes a complete drainage failure.

Other causes include a **clogged drain** further down the line creating back-pressure, a **shared drain line** where another fixture (toilet, sink) is competing for airflow, or in older Ottawa homes, a drain that was never properly vented to begin with.

What This Means for Your Home

Gurgling is worth taking seriously. A compromised P-trap seal can allow **sewer gases** — including hydrogen sulfide and methane — to enter your bathroom. If you notice gurgling accompanied by a rotten egg smell, that's a sign the trap seal is being siphoned and gas is getting through.

Ottawa-Specific Context

Ottawa's freeze-thaw cycles are hard on roof vent stacks. Ice damming inside a vent pipe is a common winter cause of gurgling drains, and it typically resolves as temperatures rise — but if it's recurring every winter, the vent may need to be inspected or extended.

What You Should Do

Start by checking if the gurgling happens when only the tub drains, or also when you flush the toilet or run the sink. If multiple fixtures gurgle together, the issue is likely in the main stack or vent — a plumber should inspect it. If it's isolated to the tub, try clearing the drain of hair and soap buildup first with a drain snake or enzyme cleaner.

If the problem persists or you're smelling sewer gas, that warrants a professional plumbing inspection. If the fix involves opening walls or modifying the vent stack, that's plumbing work that may require a permit in Ottawa. A licensed contractor can assess whether your venting meets current Ontario Building Code requirements — especially relevant in older homes where original plumbing may predate modern standards.

If you're dealing with recurring drain issues and considering a bathroom update at the same time, Ottawa Bathrooms offers free consultations and can assess your plumbing as part of a renovation scope.

Why is my shower pressure so low?

Low shower pressure is typically caused by mineral buildup in the showerhead, water pressure issues in your home's plumbing system, or problems with the shower valve or pipes. The most common culprit in Ottawa's hard water areas is calcium and lime deposits clogging the showerhead openings.

Start by **removing and cleaning your showerhead** - unscrew it and soak it overnight in white vinegar to dissolve mineral deposits. If buildup is severe, use an old toothbrush to scrub the holes clean. Many Ottawa homeowners are surprised how much this simple step improves their shower experience. You can also check if your showerhead has a flow restrictor (a small plastic disc) that may be partially blocked.

Water pressure problems throughout your home indicate issues with your main water line, pressure regulator, or municipal supply. If only your shower has low pressure, the problem is likely isolated to that fixture. Check if other taps in the bathroom have similar issues - if they do, you might have a **partially closed shut-off valve** or buildup in the supply lines.

Older shower valves can develop internal problems where cartridges or mixing valves become clogged or worn. This is particularly common in homes built before 2000. In Ottawa's climate, temperature fluctuations can also cause expansion and contraction that affects valve performance over time.

If cleaning the showerhead doesn't solve the problem, or if you're dealing with an older shower system, it's time to call a licensed plumber. **Pressure issues can indicate more serious plumbing problems** that require professional diagnosis and repair.

For persistent low pressure issues or shower system upgrades, Ottawa Bathrooms can assess your situation and recommend the best solution for your home's specific plumbing configuration.

Q4

Why is my shower grout turning black?

Black grout in your shower is typically caused by mold and mildew growth, which thrives in the warm, humid environment of bathrooms. This discoloration occurs when moisture gets trapped in porous grout lines and isn't properly ventilated or cleaned regularly.

Mold and mildew are the primary culprits behind black grout. These fungi feed on soap residue, body oils, and organic matter that accumulate in grout lines. Poor ventilation exacerbates the problem by allowing moisture to linger after showers. Unsealed or deteriorating grout is particularly vulnerable because it absorbs water and provides an ideal breeding ground for these microorganisms.

Poor grout quality or installation can also contribute to premature blackening. If the grout wasn't properly mixed, applied, or cured during installation, it may be more porous than intended. Additionally, using sanded grout in narrow joints (less than 1/8 inch) or unsanded grout in wide joints can create weak spots where moisture penetrates more easily.

In Ottawa's climate, bathroom ventilation is especially important during winter months when indoor humidity levels rise. **Proper exhaust fan operation** during and after showers is crucial - the fan should run for at least 30 minutes after showering to remove excess moisture. Many Ottawa homes have undersized or poorly functioning exhaust fans that don't adequately ventilate the space.

Immediate solutions include cleaning with a bleach solution or commercial mold remover, but this is often temporary. For long-term prevention, consider having your grout professionally cleaned and sealed annually. If the blackening returns quickly or covers large areas, the grout may need to be removed and replaced with a higher-quality, properly sealed product.

For persistent mold issues or if you're planning a shower renovation, Ottawa Bathrooms can assess your ventilation needs and recommend proper waterproofing solutions to prevent future grout problems.

Q5

Why does my toilet keep clogging?

Frequent toilet clogs usually stem from one of several common issues: low water flow, improper items being flushed, or problems with the toilet or plumbing system itself.

The most common culprit is **flushing inappropriate items** down the toilet. Even products marketed as "flushable" like wet wipes, feminine hygiene products, or excessive toilet paper can cause recurring clogs. These items don't break down quickly and can accumulate in your pipes or catch on rough spots in older plumbing.

Low-flow toilets installed in the 1990s and early 2000s often lack sufficient flushing power to clear waste effectively. If your toilet is from this era, it may struggle with normal use. Additionally, **mineral buildup** in the toilet's rim holes or siphon jet can reduce water flow, making clogs more likely. Hard water, common in many Ottawa area homes, accelerates this buildup.

Partial blockages in your drain line can also cause frequent clogs. Tree roots infiltrating sewer lines, accumulated debris, or bellied pipes (common in older Ottawa homes) create catch points where waste gets stuck. If multiple fixtures in your home are draining slowly, this suggests a main line issue rather than just the toilet.

Toilet design problems like an improperly sized trapway or worn flapper that doesn't stay open long enough can contribute to poor flushing performance. Older toilets may also have developed cracks in the internal passages that affect water flow.

For immediate relief, ensure you're only flushing toilet paper and waste, and consider using less toilet paper per flush. However, if clogs persist despite proper use, you likely need a plumber to inspect your toilet and drain line.

Professional diagnosis can identify whether you need toilet repairs, replacement, or drain cleaning to solve the problem permanently.

For persistent toilet issues in your Ottawa home, consider having a licensed plumber assess both your toilet and drain line to identify the root cause and recommend the best solution.

Q6

Why is my vanity countertop cracking?

Vanity countertop cracks typically develop from structural movement, improper installation, or material stress over time. The most common cause is inadequate support underneath the countertop, especially around sink cutouts where the material is weakened.

Structural issues are often the primary culprit. If your vanity cabinet is settling, the house is experiencing foundation movement, or the countertop wasn't properly supported during installation, stress cracks will appear. This is particularly common with heavier materials like granite or quartz that need solid, level support across the entire surface. In Ottawa's climate, seasonal temperature changes can also cause expansion and contraction that contributes to cracking.

Installation problems frequently lead to premature cracking. If the countertop wasn't properly shimmed and leveled, or if there are gaps between the countertop and cabinet frame, the material will flex under normal use and eventually crack. Undermount sinks are especially problematic if not adequately supported with brackets or blocking underneath. Poor-quality adhesive or insufficient fastening can also allow movement that causes stress fractures.

Material-specific factors play a role depending on your countertop type. Laminate countertops crack when the substrate swells from water damage or when seams fail. Natural stone develops cracks along natural fissures or from impact damage. Engineered quartz, while more durable, can crack from thermal shock (like placing a hot pot directly on the surface) or from point loads if something heavy is dropped.

In Ottawa's older homes, plumbing vibrations from water hammer or settling can gradually work countertops loose from their supports. If you're noticing new cracks appearing, it's worth having a renovation contractor assess whether the vanity cabinet itself is still square and properly anchored to the wall studs.

For a proper diagnosis and repair solution, request a consultation with Ottawa Bathrooms - we can determine whether this is a simple fix or indicates a larger structural issue that needs addressing.

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Why does my bathroom drain smell bad?

Bad bathroom drain smells are typically caused by dried-out P-traps, buildup of hair and soap scum, or sewer gas escaping through compromised seals. The most common culprit is a dry P-trap - the curved section of pipe under your drain that should always hold water to block sewer gases.

If a bathroom isn't used regularly, the water in the P-trap can evaporate, allowing sewer gases to rise up through the drain. This is especially common in guest bathrooms, basement bathrooms, or floor drains. The solution is simple: run water for 30 seconds to refill the trap. For drains that aren't used often, pour a small amount of mineral oil down the drain after running water - it floats on top and slows evaporation.

Buildup in the drain is another frequent cause. Hair, soap residue, and bacteria create a slimy biofilm that produces unpleasant odors. You can often resolve this by removing the drain cover and pulling out visible hair and debris, then flushing with hot water. For deeper cleaning, pour half a cup of baking soda down the drain, followed by white vinegar, let it sit for 15 minutes, then flush with hot water.

In Ottawa's older homes, **damaged or improperly installed plumbing** can also cause persistent odors. If the smell continues after trying these solutions, or if you notice gurgling sounds or slow drainage, there may be issues with the vent stack, damaged seals, or improper trap installation that require professional attention.

When to call a professional: If odors persist after cleaning and ensuring P-traps are filled, or if you smell sewer gas throughout the bathroom rather than just at the drain, contact a licensed plumber. These symptoms can indicate serious plumbing issues that need immediate attention to prevent health hazards and potential damage.

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Why is there mold on my bathroom ceiling?

Mold on your bathroom ceiling is almost always caused by excess moisture and inadequate ventilation.

When hot, humid air from showers and baths rises to the ceiling, it condenses on the cooler surface, creating the perfect breeding ground for mold spores.

The most common culprit is **poor ventilation**. Many Ottawa homes have undersized exhaust fans or fans that aren't used consistently. Your bathroom fan should move at least 1 CFM per square foot of bathroom space, and it should run during showers and for 30 minutes afterward. If your fan is noisy, slow, or over 10 years old, it's likely not doing its job effectively.

Temperature differences also play a major role, especially in Ottawa's climate. During winter months, the contrast between warm, humid bathroom air and cold ceiling surfaces creates condensation. This is particularly problematic in older homes with poor insulation above the bathroom ceiling. If the mold appears primarily during colder months, inadequate insulation or air leaks in the ceiling cavity are likely contributing factors.

Water leaks from upstairs plumbing or roof issues can also cause ceiling mold. Look for water stains, peeling paint, or soft spots in the drywall. In Ottawa's freeze-thaw cycles, ice dams can sometimes cause roof leaks that show up as bathroom ceiling problems.

Immediate steps include cleaning the mold with a bleach solution (1:10 ratio), improving ventilation, and checking for leaks. However, if the mold covers more than 10 square feet or keeps returning, you'll need professional remediation. The underlying moisture problem must be fixed, which may involve upgrading ventilation, improving insulation, or addressing structural issues.

For persistent mold problems or bathroom ventilation upgrades, consider consulting with renovation professionals who can assess your specific situation and ensure proper moisture control.

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Why is my bathroom always humid?

Bathroom humidity is typically caused by inadequate ventilation combined with moisture from hot showers, baths, and daily use. Without proper air circulation, water vapor gets trapped and creates that persistently damp feeling.

The primary culprit is usually an **undersized or poorly functioning exhaust fan**. Many older Ottawa homes have builder-grade fans that move only 50-80 CFM (cubic feet per minute), which isn't sufficient for most bathrooms. The fan should be sized to move the air volume of your bathroom 8-10 times per hour. For a typical 8x10 bathroom, you need at least 100-120 CFM capacity.

Poor ventilation habits also contribute significantly to humidity problems. The exhaust fan should run during showers and for at least 30 minutes afterward to remove lingering moisture. Many homeowners turn it off too quickly, leaving water vapor to condense on surfaces and create that humid environment.

In Ottawa's climate, **inadequate insulation and air sealing** around the bathroom can worsen humidity issues. Cold exterior walls create condensation points where warm, moist air meets cool surfaces. This is especially common in older homes where bathroom insulation wasn't prioritized during construction.

Waterproofing problems can also trap moisture within wall cavities or subflooring, creating a cycle where humidity never fully dissipates. Failing caulk around tubs and showers, or inadequate vapor barriers behind tile, allow moisture to penetrate and linger.

To address persistent humidity, start by upgrading to a properly sized, quiet exhaust fan with a timer or humidity sensor. Ensure it's vented directly outside, not into the attic. Consider adding a small dehumidifier for immediate relief while planning longer-term ventilation improvements.

For comprehensive humidity solutions including proper ventilation design and moisture control, Ottawa Bathrooms can assess your specific situation and recommend the most effective upgrades for your home.

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Why is there water on my bathroom floor after showers?

Water on your bathroom floor after showers is typically caused by inadequate shower containment, poor ventilation, or failing seals around your shower enclosure. This is a common issue that needs prompt attention to prevent water damage to your subfloor and potential mold growth.

The most frequent culprits are **failing caulk or grout** around your shower base, tub, or glass doors. Over time, these seals deteriorate and allow water to escape onto your bathroom floor. Check the caulking around your shower pan, where the walls meet the floor, and along glass door tracks. You might also have **gaps in your shower door seals** or a shower curtain that's not properly positioned inside the tub.

Poor shower design can also be the issue. If your shower doesn't have adequate curbing, the water naturally flows outward. Frameless glass showers without proper design can allow water to escape, especially if the glass panels are too short or positioned incorrectly. Additionally, **damaged or improperly sloped shower pans** can cause water to pool and eventually find its way onto your bathroom floor.

In Ottawa's climate, **inadequate ventilation** compounds the problem. Without proper exhaust fans, excess moisture condenses on walls and floors. The Ontario Building Code requires exhaust fans in bathrooms, and they should run during and after showers to remove humidity effectively.

Immediate steps: Inspect and re-caulk any obvious gaps, ensure your shower curtain or door seals properly, and improve ventilation. However, if water continues appearing or you notice soft spots in your flooring, this indicates potential subfloor damage that requires professional assessment.

For persistent water issues or if you're considering a shower renovation to solve the problem permanently, Ottawa Bathrooms can provide a free consultation to identify the root cause and recommend the best solution for your specific situation.

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Why is water leaking behind my shower wall?

Water leaking behind your shower wall typically indicates a failure in your waterproofing system - either damaged grout, failed caulking, or compromised waterproof membrane behind the tiles.

The most common culprits are **deteriorated grout joints** between tiles and **failed caulk seals** around the tub or shower pan edges. Over time, these materials crack and shrink, creating pathways for water to penetrate behind the wall surface. Once water gets behind the tiles, it can cause significant damage to drywall, insulation, and even structural framing.

Poor initial waterproofing during installation is another major cause. Many older bathrooms lack proper waterproof membranes behind tile walls, relying only on grout and caulk for water protection. This approach inevitably fails as these materials aren't designed to be permanent water barriers. Modern installations require waterproof membranes like RedGard or Kerdi systems behind all wet area tiles.

Plumbing leaks within the wall cavity can also cause water damage that appears to come from the shower surface. Leaking shower valves, loose pipe connections, or damaged supply lines create moisture that eventually shows up as wall damage or leaks in adjacent rooms.

In Ottawa's climate, **freeze-thaw cycles** can accelerate grout and caulk failure, especially in poorly heated bathrooms or exterior walls. The expansion and contraction causes existing cracks to widen, allowing more water penetration.

Immediate action is critical to prevent mold growth and structural damage. Stop using the shower if possible and have a licensed contractor assess the situation. Proper repair involves removing damaged tiles, installing new waterproof membrane, and rebuilding the wall system - not just re-grouting the surface.

For a professional assessment of your shower leak and waterproofing solutions, Ottawa Bathrooms offers free consultations to identify the root cause and prevent further damage.

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Q12

Why is my bathroom exhaust fan not working?

A non-working bathroom exhaust fan is usually caused by electrical issues, a burned-out motor, or blockages in the ductwork. Start by checking if the fan is getting power, then inspect for physical obstructions or motor problems.

First, check the electrical connections. Make sure the wall switch is working by testing it with a voltage tester or trying a different electrical device in the same circuit. Check your home's electrical panel for any tripped breakers. If the fan has been working intermittently, loose wire connections at the switch or fan unit could be the culprit. Turn off power at the breaker before inspecting any electrical connections.

Motor failure is common in older exhaust fans. If the fan is getting power but not spinning, the motor may have seized or burned out. You might hear humming or clicking sounds when you flip the switch. Bathroom exhaust fans typically last 10-15 years with regular use, and motors can fail due to dust buildup, moisture damage, or normal wear. Sometimes the fan blades are simply stuck due to accumulated dust and debris.

Blocked ductwork can also prevent proper operation. In Ottawa's climate, ice buildup in exterior vents during winter months can block airflow and strain the motor. Check the exterior vent cap for obstructions like leaves, bird nests, or ice. Lint and dust can also accumulate in the ductwork over time, reducing efficiency and potentially causing the motor to overheat and shut down.

For safety reasons, electrical troubleshooting should be left to qualified professionals. Working with bathroom electrical systems requires knowledge of moisture-related safety codes and proper GFCI protection. If basic checks don't solve the problem, or if you're uncomfortable working with electrical components, contact a licensed electrician or renovation contractor.

Consider upgrading to a modern, energy-efficient exhaust fan if your current unit is over 10 years old. Newer models are quieter, more efficient, and often include features like humidity sensors or LED lighting. For a free consultation on bathroom ventilation upgrades, request a quote from Ottawa Bathrooms.

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