

I hate my low-flow toilet. Is there a way to make it work better?

Replacement is the best solution. But there are other things you can try.

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By [Jeanne Huber](#)

Q: *I hate my low-flow toilet, but I rent so I can't replace it. Is there anything I can do to make it work better?*

A: Low-flow toilets got a bad reputation after Congress ordered manufacturers in 1992 to sell only models that use 1.6 gallons per flush — about half as much as typical 1980s toilets — within two years. Some manufacturers created designs that performed well with less water, while other manufacturers basically just reduced the volume of water in the tanks of their old 3.5-gallon-per-flush models. Not surprisingly, the quick-fix models didn't work well, forcing people to flush multiple times just to get the bowl clean.

Ask Jeanne anything about home maintenance

Jeanne Huber can help solve your problems about home repairs, gardening issues and anything that affects your house, condo or apartment. Jeanne is a trained carpenter and a co-founder of [BARN](#), a craft and DIY center in Washington. She has written the How To column since 2005. Ask Jeanne anything at localliving@washpost.com.

By 2002, there was enough worry about customer dissatisfaction that five water agencies in California, Seattle and Tampa joined with 17 agencies in Canada to sponsor testing aimed at identifying models that were both frugal with water and effective at flushing. That testing protocol, called MaP for Maximum Performance, is now the industry standard, and many new toilets perform well on even less water. Some toilets exceed the standards more than others, of course, which is why homeowners or apartment owners who need to replace a toilet are smart to do some research before purchasing. The [MaP Testing website has an online tool](#) that allows users to identify top-performing toilets filtered by other characteristics, such as seat height and distance from the wall to the center of the rough-in hole in the floor (a key issue for a replacement toilet). Or consumers can simply look for toilets with a WaterSense label, a voluntary [marketing program sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency](#). All WaterSense toilets use 1.28 gallons or less per flush yet still score well on the MaP tests.

If you have a low-flow toilet that wasn't designed well, replacement really is the best option, maybe the only one. But if you are a renter, or even if you're a homeowner who would rather not spend money replacing a toilet, there are a few other things to try that might get better performance from the one you own.

Even a well-designed low-flow toilet won't flush well if there are clogs in the inlets under the rim, where water flows in to refill the tank. So checking and cleaning these holes is the first thing to try. Use a mirror to inspect the holes. If you see some that are plugged with gunk, one solution is to poke through with a wire, such as a short piece you cut from a coat hanger.

But if your water has a high mineral content, mineral deposits are probably clogging the holes, and [the best way to get rid of those](#) is with vinegar or an acidic toilet bowl cleaner. The challenge is to keep the cleaner in place long enough to break the chemical bonds in the deposits. Instead of trying to squirt cleaner onto the underside of the rim or repeatedly brushing more vinegar there, take off the lid and pour vinegar or an acidic cleaner into the overflow tube in the tank. This tube is the vertical one, usually about an inch wide, that has a thinner, flexible water tube clipped inside.

Blair Gilbert, the mostly retired owner of Gilbert's Pro Hardware in St. Clair Shores, Michigan, [shows the process in a YouTube video](#) produced as part of his Mr. Hardware channel. He dumps a bucket of water into the bowl of the toilet, which empties most of the water in the bowl without triggering the handle to refill the toilet. Then he takes off the lid and pours a quart of acidic toilet cleaner into the overflow tube. He uses [Rooto toilet bowl cleaner and delimer](#) (\$5.80 a quart at dkhardware.com), but viewers of his video report good results with other, more widely available acidic cleaners, such as [CLR Calcium, Lime and Rust Remover](#) (\$6.59 for 28 ounces at Ace Hardware). Household vinegar should work, too.

Most of the cleaner will dribble out through the holes below the rim, into the bowl. Gilbert then pours enough water into the toilet bowl to refill it to its usual level, which forces some of the toilet cleaner in the bowl to flow out through the trap at the bottom to dissolve any mineral crust that formed there. Half an hour later, he flushes the toilet and all looks good. Sometimes, he says, it needs two applications.

Another thing to try: Check whether the fill valve is allowing enough water to flow into the tank. Look for the intended water line, which is usually marked about half an inch to a full inch below the top of the overflow tube. If the actual water level is below the line, adjusting the valve to fill to a higher level will allow the tank to store more water, which in turn will result in more powerful flushes. Do a Web search for [“how to adjust a fill valve”](#) and scroll through to find a model like or at least similar to yours.

Sometimes the culprit is the chain that connects the handle to the flapper at the bottom of the tank. If you’ve noticed that the toilet flushes better when you hold down the handle longer, this is probably the issue. There is too much slack in the chain for the handle to lift the flapper fully, so when you release the handle while the toilet is still flushing, the flapper falls down prematurely and stops water from flowing into the tank. The toilet doesn’t get full use of even the amount of water that the low-flow rule dictates. Adjust the chain to take out some of the slack. Usually, leaving about half an inch of slack is about right. If excess chain gets in the way of the flapper, cut off the chain — after you make sure you’ve found the length that empties the tank fully even if you release the handle right away.

Have a problem in your home? Send questions to localliving@washpost.com. Put “How To” in the subject line, tell us where you live and try to include a photo.

What readers are saying

The comments discuss various ways to improve the performance of low-flow toilets. Suggestions include inspecting and cleaning the inlets under the rim, using aftermarket bidets to increase water flow, and adjusting the flush mechanism to use more water. Some commenters recommend... [Show more](#)

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