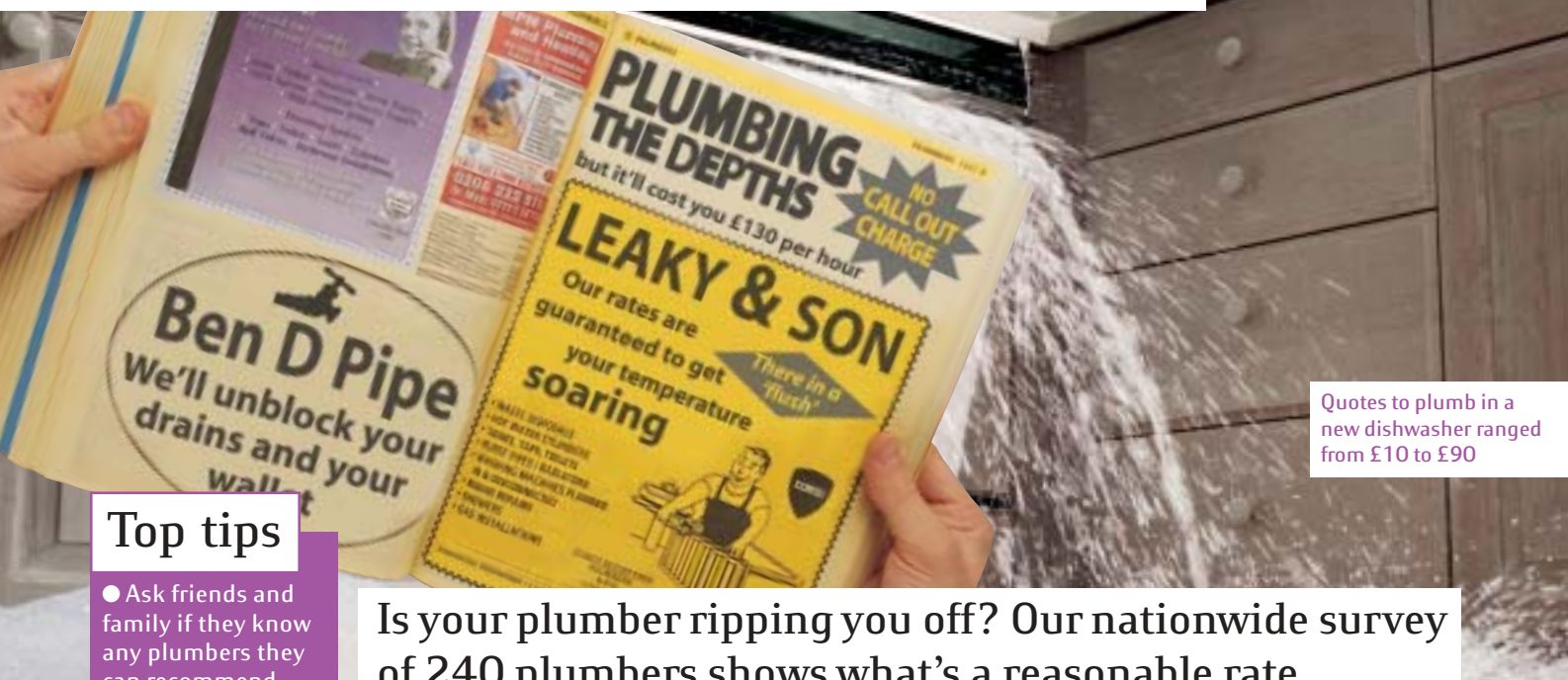


Plumbers' prices



Top tips

- Ask friends and family if they know any plumbers they can recommend.
- It's best to use a member of a trade association, but don't take the plumber's word that they're a member. Double check with the association.
- Get at least three quotes. Ask for a quote for the whole job as well as the hourly rate, including any first hour or call-out charge.
- Ask how long the job will take. If one person tells you ten minutes while another says four hours, you'll know something is wrong.
- Check that prices include VAT.
- If a plumber wants to inspect the work before giving a price, make sure they don't charge you for this.
- Before hiring a plumber, get a written quote with a fixed price.

Is your plumber ripping you off? Our nationwide survey of 240 plumbers shows what's a reasonable rate

We just charge £65 per half hour plus VAT.' You could be forgiven for thinking this was a quote from a top City law firm rather than a plumber who's been asked to swap over a dishwasher. And an average public sector worker doesn't earn £130 a day, let alone an hour – especially for doing a job that one Stratford-upon-Avon plumber described as 'as simple as changing a fuse on a plug'.

But a combination of a shortage of plumbers and a lack of reliable pricing information means that some feel they can get away with charging the

earth. The Construction Industry Training Board reckons 31,700 more plumbers are needed in the UK by 2008 to meet demand. Indeed, several plumbers we spoke to complained that they already had more customers than they could handle.

'To be honest,' one Bournemouth plumber bemoaned, 'I'm not looking to take on any more work'. Another plumber in neighbouring Poole told us: 'I'm busy for the next two to three months.' The Institute of Plumbing and Heating Engineering (IPHE) – the main trade body – is concerned about

Trade associations offer more protection

'That's confidential,' one plumber told us when we asked if he was in a trade association. Despite his reluctance to admit to it, we advise you to use a plumber who belongs to a trade body.

The main one, with 12,000 members, is the Institute of Plumbers and Heating Engineering (IPHE). Other bodies include the Association of Plumbing and Heating Contractors (APHC) in England and Wales,

and the Scottish and Northern Ireland Plumbing Employers' Federation (SNIPEF). All three can give lists of members near you.

The benefits

Unlike an ombudsman scheme, these associations don't offer a fully independent investigation if things go wrong. But they do offer a complaints system. If you make a complaint against an IPHE member, for example, it will, if

required, send an inspector round to report on the quality of the job done. APHC and SNIPEF both offer a warranty for work carried out. If the work isn't satisfactory, the warranty means they'll cover the costs to rectify faulty work.

No price difference

Our research showed little difference in price between members of trade bodies and non-members. Nationally, typical quotes to plumb

in a dishwasher ranged from £35 to £50 for those in trade bodies and £30 to £48 for those who aren't.

When plumbers lie

Some people will say anything to get your business – our research uncovered a dozen plumbers who falsely claimed to be IPHE members. Contact the trade body to check that your plumber's a member before they start work (see p56 for details).

this issue: 'An industry where demand outstrips supply leaves open a gap for the cowboy to thrive.' While we cannot magic up new plumbers to fill in the shortfall, we can provide you with information to ensure you don't get ripped off. To do so, we asked for quotes from 240 plumbers across the UK.

Our research shows that prices vary enormously. Quotes for installing a new dishwasher and disconnecting an old one ranged from £10 in the Midlands to £90 in south-east England. Hourly rates ranged from £9 in Wales to £130 in the South-East. Use the table, right, as a guide to prices. If you are quoted more than the range for your area, you're probably paying over the odds.

PRICE VARIATIONS

Not all plumbers give hourly rates; many prefer to give a specific quote based on the job. This, as a Bury St Edmunds plumber told us, is 'so you know exactly what you're paying'. He claimed that plumbers who charge by the hour 'invariably take their time. They disappear for half an hour to read the newspaper. It's human nature.'

'An industry where demand outstrips supply leaves open a gap for the cowboy to thrive'

Trade body IPHE

Whether or not you share this plumber's lack of faith in his colleagues, find out how long a job will take (the graph, right, will help with this) – so whichever way a plumber likes to quote, you'll get a figure for the overall cost. On top of this, factor in the cost of parts. Most plumbers buy them from a builders' merchant and add a mark-up, typically of around 10 to 20 per cent.

Watch out, too, for call-out charges, especially if it's an evening or weekend. And beware of plumbers who don't mention all the costs. One Romford plumber bragged that he would charge only £30 an hour, saying: 'If you ring up a Corgi-registered plumber, you'll find that he'll charge £70 to £80 an hour.' Only when asked did he later admit that he charged a £40 call-out fee.

Many plumbers often charge more for the first hour, which effectively acts as a call-out charge. The difference can range from a few pounds to, in one case we came across, a plumber who charged the first hour at five times the subsequent hourly rate. This Cardiff plumber claimed to charge just £9 an hour – yet wanted £50 for a one-hour job. He did offer to reduce this charge: 'If you want to pay VAT it's a £50 cheque. Otherwise £40 cash.'

'I don't charge my punters VAT,' another plumber told us. 'I think it's disgusting.' Steer clear of people like this – for practical reasons, if nothing else. It probably means they won't declare the job for tax purposes. If anything goes wrong, it will be hard to seek redress as there's unlikely to be a record of the job – you'll end up spending a lot more to put it right than you saved by avoiding the VAT.

Reasonable rates

REGION

REGION	Typical costs	
	First hour (£)	Subsequent hours (£)
East Anglia	35 to 51	25 to 50
Midlands	25 to 50	25 to 35
North-East and Yorkshire	25 to 48	20 to 30
North-West	30 to 50	18 to 25
Scotland	28 to 43	25 to 35
South-East and London	35 to 55	35 to 50
South-West	29 to 45	20 to 35
Wales	30 to 40	25 to 35
NATIONALLY	30 to 50	25 to 40

Typical costs The ranges are calculated by ignoring the 25% most expensive and 25% cheapest quotes.

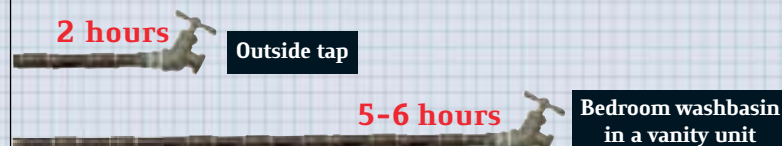
OUR RESEARCH

In May 2005, posing as ordinary consumers, our researchers contacted 240 plumbers across the UK. We asked them to quote a price for swapping a new dishwasher for an old one. We also asked how long the job would take, their hourly rate, and whether they belonged to a trade association (which we then checked).

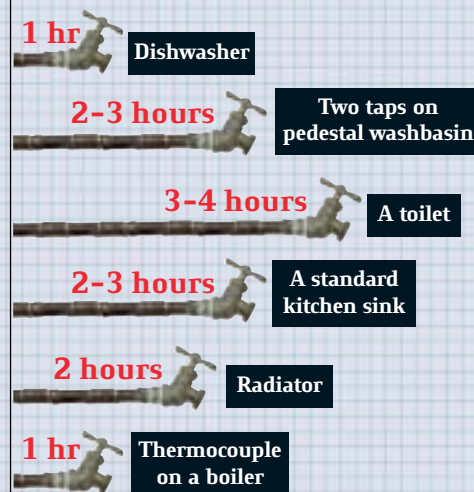
Time taken to carry out common plumbing jobs

We asked leading DIY expert Mike Lawrence to estimate how long the jobs below should take.

INSTALLATION



REPLACING



The figures are a guide only – any number of hitches could alter the amount of time taken. For jobs that also involve gas, make sure you use a Corgi-registered plumber.

Hours to do the job