

Tackling the block

New technology makes short work of blocked pipes – but old favourites can be effective, too

For many years, the trusty plunger and potent caustic soda have been the main solutions to a blocked plughole. But nowadays there's an array of alternatives to choose from. Brightly coloured cocktails of bleaches and acids come as liquid, foamers (granules or gel that foam when you add water) or powder. And technological 'super plungers' claim to clear stubborn blockages with minimal hassle and time.

We put these new products to the test against more traditional methods. The result? Caustic soda is more effective than most new-fangled cocktails. In fact, three chemical solutions – Domestos 15 Minute Sink & Pipe Unblocker (17), Cillit Bang Universal Stain & Drain (18) and Buster Bathroom Drain Clear (19) – are less effective than a kettle of hot water.

But there is some progress: the power plungers beat everything hands down.

Contacts

A2000

020 8401 0002
www.merproducts.com

Betterware

0845 121 1010
www.betterware.co.uk

Buster

0870 6030420
www.busteronline.co.uk

Cillit Bang

0845 769 7079
www.cillitbang.co.uk

Domestos

0800 776645
www.unilever.com

Drain Unblocker

0113 3900 576

Hiltons

020 8979 8284

Homebase

0845 077 8888
www.homebase.co.uk

Jeyes

01842 757575

www.jeyes.co.uk

KilBlock

01494 793 900

Mr Muscle

0800 353 353

www.scjohnson.co.uk

One Shot

01482 830952

Power Plumber

01223 265598

www.interland-trading.co.uk

How we test

We bung up the plughole of our testing sink with 14g of hair, soap, toothpaste and cotton fibres or 18g of fat and food debris, and add 100ml of water. We then time how long it takes to clear the blockage with each product.

Our sink is connected to a transparent pipe, so

we can observe the reactions while measuring temperature changes. We allow each unblocker 24 hours to do its job, though most users would call a plumber much sooner.

Finally, we test chemical unblockers on materials such as laminate, stainless steel and copper to see what damage they cause.

Don't Buy

Mr Muscle Kitchen Sink Unblocker (20) is supposed to effervesce in water, loosening the blockage. If it doesn't fizz enough, as happened in our tests, it coagulates to cause a worse blockage. We

cleared it with pure acid, but most people would need a plumber. We tried it several times, with varying amounts of water, but the result was the same.

The manufacturer told us: 'There may have been standing water above the blockage. In this circumstance, the crystals start to work prior to reaching the blockage, considerably weakening the product's ability to remove blockages.'

We aren't sure how you are expected to remove any standing water. If there isn't any to start with, you wouldn't know the sink was blocked.



1 MECHANICAL

80% Power Plumber Plunger Kit £6.99

The Power Plumber blasted our blockages away in a few seconds, using a cylinder of compressed gas. It comes with interchangeable heads

for use in bathrooms, kitchens and toilets, and is easy to use with one hand. You can buy it online.

WE LIKE An efficient method that doesn't involve chemicals.

Available Online Cylinder volume 150ml Number of shots Approx 15



2 MECHANICAL

77% A2000 Pressure Plumber £10.99

Like the Power Plumber, the Pressure Plumber uses compressed gas to disperse blockages. It is just as effective, but it's slightly more difficult to use as it doesn't have interchangeable heads for different apertures.

The A2000 also contains a lemon deodorant to help cover any nasty smells. It's available online.

WATCH OUT Both this and the Power Plumber have quite a kick – so keep a firm grip.

Available Online Cylinder volume 250ml Number of shots Approx 24



USING THE TABLE

We tested the most popular mechanical and chemical unblockers on sale. The more stars the better.

Specification

Price We give the cheapest available high-street price as we went to press. Where a product is available only online, the price is in *italics*.

Test performance Bathroom/Kitchen blockages

How efficiently blockages were cleared.

Convenience How easy the product is to use and how clear instructions are.

Safety Quality of advice on safety risks and effectiveness of childproof lids.

Damage to surfaces How little damage the

product caused in 24 hours.

Score

This ignores price and is based on:

Mechanical unblockers

Performance **60%**

Safety **25%**

Convenience **15%**

Chemical unblockers

Performance **60%**

Safety **25%**

Convenience **10%**

Surface damage **5%**

8 CHEMICAL

72% Drain Unblocker £3.49

Drain Unblocker's active ingredient is sulphuric acid, but it's safe to use if you follow the clear instructions. When you add it to water, heat is generated – we found that too little water leads to temperatures above 100°C, which could deform plastic pipes. It also damaged our test surfaces – watch out for spillages and keep it away from children. It's available at Robert Dyas.

WE LIKE This was the quickest chemical product.

Cheapest store Robert Dyas **Weight** 450g **Active ingredient** Sulphuric acid



9 CHEMICAL

63% Mr Muscle Active Foamer £3.48

This product's main ingredients are caustic soda and bleach. It foams on contact with water, and managed to clear the kitchen blockage completely in an hour and the bathroom blockage in 24 hours. Prolonged exposure to it can damage pipe joints and blacken lead. It's available from Asda, Sainsbury's and Tesco.

WE LIKE It's not as ferocious as sulphuric acid.

Cheapest stores Asda, Sainsbury's and Tesco **Weight** 500g **Active ingredient** Caustic soda

**Drain without pain**

- Don't pour hot oil or fat down the drain. Add bird seed to fat, let it set and use it to feed the birds. Pour liquid oil back into the container it came in, and put it in your dustbin or dispose of it at the tip.
- Remove hair from plugholes, as it creates a mesh on which bathroom blockages form.
- If a blockage occurs, try a plunger first. Use a cloth or rubber-gloved hand to seal the overflow so that the plunging pressure doesn't force debris out through it. If that doesn't work, try hot water. It can clear pretty stubborn blockages. Then think about using one of our chemical Best Buys.
- Never use a plunger after a chemical treatment. The high pressure it creates could blow harmful substances back through the overflow.
- If you decide to remove the U-bend, be careful about spilling chemicals or water when you remove the trap. Check that the reassembled joints are sealed properly.

BRAND	SPECIFICATION		WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE					SCORE %
	PRICE (£)	TYPE	BATHROOM BLOCKAGES	KITCHEN BLOCKAGES	CONVENIENCE	SAFETY	DAMAGE TO SURFACES	
MECHANICAL								
1 POWER PLUMBER Plunger Kit	6.99	Gas pressure	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	n/a	80
2 A2000 Pressure Plumber	10.99	Gas pressure	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	n/a	77
3 HOMEBASE Power Plunger	3.49	Water pressure	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	n/a	62
4 BETTERWARE Drain U-bend Brush	3.99	Brush	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★	n/a	60
5 DIY STORE Mini Plunger (with handle)	1.98	Plunger	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★	n/a	57
6 DIY STORE Standard Plunger	1.99	Plunger	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★	n/a	54
7 KILBLOCK Sink Plunger	2.90	Water pressure	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★	n/a	54
CHEMICAL								
8 DRAIN UNBLOCKER Sinks, Toilets, Ubends	3.49	Liquid	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★	72
9 MR MUSCLE Active Foamer	3.48	Foamer	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	63
10 HOMEBASE Kitchen Plughole Unblocker	3.49	Foamer	see ^a	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	60
11 ONE SHOT Instant Drain Cleaner	6.49	Liquid	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★	★	59
12 BUSTER Kitchen Drain Clear	2.49	Foamer	see ^a	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	58
13 JEYES Kleen Off Caustic Soda	1.69	Powder	★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	55
14 DOMESTOS No 1 Germ Killer	0.98	Liquid	★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	53
15 HILTONS Spirit of Salts	2.99	Liquid	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★	53
16 JEYES Kleen Off Sink & Drain Cleaner	1.69	Liquid	★★	★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	51
17 DOMESTOS 15 Minute Sink & Pipe Unblocker	2.99	Liquid	★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	48
18 CILLIT BANG Universal Stain & Drain	2.99	Liquid	★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	46
19 BUSTER Bathroom Drain Clear	2.49	Liquid	★★	see ^a	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	45
20 MR MUSCLE Kitchen Sink Unblocker	2.99	Powder	see ^a	★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	29

^a We tested unblockers only in places where manufacturers say they should work. If they claim their products are suitable for both kitchens and bathrooms, we tested them in both