

How to Take a Shower

By Dan Phillips

I don't recall ever having been taught how to take a shower. Perhaps it simply dawned on me at some point. But as primal pleasures go, a long hot shower competes with the best. And that is also when my singing voice is at its peak.

But just as the leg bone is connected to the hipbone, the showerhead is connected to the hot-water heater, which in turn is connected to your wallet. But yet it goes deeper than just your wallet. The long hot shower is also connected to regional water supplies and global energy resources.

In America we think in terms of gallons per minute. But the rest of the world thinks in terms of a one-gallon shower, or that more luxurious two-gallon shower, regardless of the minutes. If your home is average, showering accounts for about 20% of the water consumed in your household, and water heating accounts for about 20% of your annual energy expense. If your hot water heater is located at the opposite end of the house, then both of those figures are more, since you must run the hot faucet longer before the water gets hot, and the hot water left in the line after you finish goes unused.

There are some strategies that are simple, and will bring us in line with the rest of the world.

The first strategy is a "tankless" hot water heater—that is, a hot water heater that doesn't have a tank. Instead of keeping 40 gallons of water at 130 degrees, for instance, while you're asleep, it heats cold water to the desired temperature only when you turn on the hot water faucet. It doesn't store any hot water. It's the difference between leaving your car running all night or starting it only when you would like to use it.

We all know that a water heater should be drained once a year to get rid of the sediment at the bottom—which impacts efficiency. But in my entire life I have never met anyone who actually does that.

Tank water heaters live 10-15 years. A tankless water heater lasts an average of 20 years. So when your tank water heater is in its golden years, you might consider replacing it with a tankless. Yes, they are more expensive. But a tank water heater will cost around \$300, and then it requires at least four square feet to house it. If you have an average house, four square feet are worth at least \$300. The tankless water heater will cost around \$500, \$300 of which you would have spent anyway. And since they are the size of a breadbox, the four square feet that your tank hot water took up can be used in another way. So the math is in your favor, not to mention the energy savings.

A second strategy is to install a low-flow showerhead. If we were trying to debark a tree, or blast grime off of our tractor, then a low-flow showerhead would not be appropriate. But we are only bathing—certainly one of the more gentle activities that we do.

A low-flow showerhead is easy to install, even for the home-repair challenged. The first step is to get out your adjustable wrench, or ask your neighbor for his. Unscrew the old showerhead (righty-tighty, lefty-loosey). And, in case you are wondering, no, the water in the shower should not be running. Take the showerhead to the nearest building or plumbing supply outlet, and in a calm voice, ask for a low-flow shower head that could be expected to replace the one you're holding. Plumbing anxiety has never been so easy to address. In fact, when you later see your neighbor, yawn, and say, "Yeah, just doing a little plumbing."

The new showerhead will have a diagram of how it should be installed. Of course you also could read the directions, but (yawn), just go ahead and install it. And then take a test shower before you announce you have replaced the showerhead.

If you really would like to be an environmentally conscious nerd, get the low-flow showerhead that has its own shut-off. Here's the lesson on how to take a shower that you (or I) never got:

1. Pretend you're in the Virgin Islands.
2. Turn the water on, adjust the temperature, and then get wet.
3. Turn the water off. Lather up. Scrub. Now is your opportunity to sing, or even whistle (since you can't whistle with water hitting you in the face).
4. Turn the water back on, which will be at the same temperature, since you have the separate shut-off. Rinse. Don't miss a bar in your song.
5. Turn the water off. For a finale, fling the shower curtain open, and present your clean self in the mirror, arms spread wide. Bow.

Then after your performance, when you're lounging in the den in your robe, chuckle to yourself. Indulge in an inner movie about how smart you are, that indeed you know how to save money and the planet by simply taking a shower. During the movie, save a section for how you reprimand the shower hogs, after which there is insane applause and cheering. You might even want to fix some popcorn.