



Polybutylene Pipes – Bad, But Not That Bad

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In the 1970's Polybutylene was a gleam in the home building industry's eye. It had the promise of making homes less costly to build, and hence to buy. But by the 1980's, they began to discover that it was nothing but a pipe dream. Polybutylene, or PB, is a material that was used to manufacture plumbing supply pipes. The pipes that carry pressurized water to sinks, toilets and tubs. PB is usually gray in color, and on rare occasions black or blue. It was installed in homes across the United States between 1978 and 1996.

When a small group of folks living in a mobile home community in Tennessee got to talking, over some pulled pork BBQ on a hot Sunday afternoon I would imagine, they discovered they were all having similar problems with PB piping installed in their homes.

Upon investigation it was discovered that PB piping reacts with chlorine in the drinking water supply. This reaction causes the PB pipes to deteriorate from the inside out, making the pipe become weak and brittle. This discovery prompted one of them to get up the gumption to call a lawyer about the situation and eventually Cox vs. Shell Oil, a class-action law suit, was born. To make a long story short, Cox beat Shell to the tune of about a billion dollars. That money was set aside to replace PB pipes in homes if they have, or have had, leaks from the PB piping. Some claims can still be made today (see web references below for more information).

The problem for home owners is that there is no way to determine the condition of PB piping by looking at it. Moreover, many professionals in the industry feel that it's not if you'll have a problem, but when. Such a problem can start small like a drip, or as a ruptured pipe. While most of the failures are on the drip end of the spectrum, a dripping water line behind a wall or in a ceiling can cause major damage in the form of mold and possibly structural damage before it's discovered.

Insurance companies don't like PB pipes either. Many of them won't insure a home with PB in it. They may not ask when the policy is written, but if they find out, the client is likely to get dropped.

The bad news is that replacement of polybutylene pipes is usually recommended. The not so bad news is that the cost and process of doing so shouldn't be a deal breaker. A Colorado company that specializes in replumbing homes that have PB piping is Replumb Specialties, Inc. On their website (replumbs.com) you can get a fairly firm estimate on the cost of replumbing a home. As an example, a typical single story, 3 bedroom, 2 bath home with a finished basement can be replumbed with copper pipe for about \$3100. This includes tearing out the PB, installing copper, patching holes in drywall, and tile, and matching paint for about the cost of new carpeting. How often is carpeting a deal breaker?

You might think that replumbing a house and patching all the holes would take two weeks or more, but it can be done in about 3-4 days. And since the work is a lot easier if the house is vacant, having it done right before or after closing is perfect timing. So don't let PB kill your deal, negotiate a settlement!

Here are some additional internet resources if you'd like to learn more: spencerclass.com, pbpipe.com, replumbs.com, polybutylene.com.