Expert advice

DIY DILEMMAS

Big Strong Boys' Jake Robinson answers your DIY questions and this month provides a step-by-step guide to tiling your walls

JAKE ROBINSON

WHY HAS THE HOT WATER IN MY BOILER RUN COLD?

I have a combi boiler in my house. The central heating is working fine but the water no longer runs hot. Have you got any ideas as to why this could be? Any advice would be ace!
Sarah Cox, Edinburgh

Jake says This is a common problem with combi boilers. It could be one of two things. Your diverter valve may be faulty and need replacing. When you turn on the hot tap the boiler has to divert the incoming cold water through the heat exchanger in place of the heating system water and the valve that does this can get stuck. Diverters will set you back about £80. If it isn't the diverter, it may be the diaphragm, which is housed inside the diverter valve. This is easily replaced in most combis. It should cost about £15 for a new diaphragm kit. You'll need to get a Corgi-registered plumber to diagnose and sort out whatever the problem is though, as it's not a DIY job!

HOW CAN I RESCUE MY ROTTING WINDOW LEDGES?

My window ledges on the outside of my house have started to rot. I wonder whether there is a way of saving them without having to get them replaced?
Louise Jones, Manchester

Jake says It depends on how damaged the windowsills are. Normally when the wood is rotten, you can put your finger into it and will find that the timber is very soft. Mark around the affected area with a pencil and dig out any rotten bits using a hammer and wood chisel until you hit hard timber. You then need to sand the whole ledge back and fill the areas that you have dug out with a two-part exterior wood filler. If you find that some of the timber is still hard but has weathered, then apply a wood hardener, available from any DIY store. Once you've done all this, apply a primer to the wood before giving it a couple of coats of exterior paint.

If you find that the whole ledge is soft, then you'll need to chisel away the whole piece of wood from the window and replace it – which can be a tricky job because you need to glue and screw it on to the window. For this I'd suggest calling in the professionals.

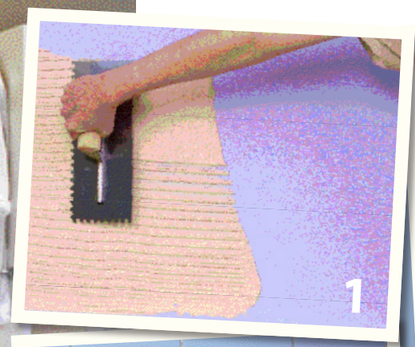
WHAT SHOULD I DO TO REPAIR MY LAMINATE WORKTOP?

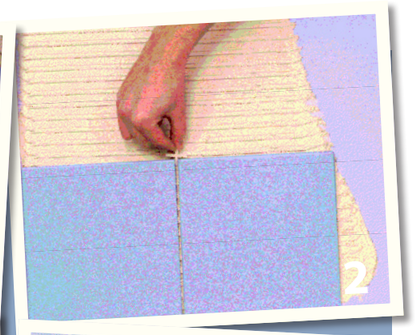
I dropped a saucepan and chipped off the edge of our laminate worktop. What is the best way to repair it without causing a mess?
Alex Smith, London

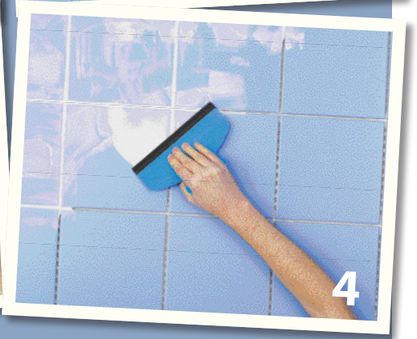
Jake says If you've kept the chipped-off piece, you can repair the worktop using jointing compounds, which are usually supplied with a fitted kitchen (they're also available in all DIY stores). Apply the compound to the worktop edge and broken section of laminate. Wait for it to become tacky and stick the piece back in place with masking tape. Once the adhesive is dry, remove the tape and use a pencil or marker pen to disguise any white edges along the join. Alternatively, if you've lost the broken-off piece, contact the kitchen manufacturer to see if they can send you another laminate edging strip. Then you can just replace the whole strip, avoiding any visible repair join.

Send in your DIY queries to

Expert advice, Real Homes, 64 North Row, London W1K 7LL or email Jake at realhomes@hf-uk.com







Jake's guide to... tiling a wall

A tiled wall is attractive, hardwearing and easy to clean. The choice of tiles available today means that you'll easily find the type you want in a style to suit your decor. If you thought that tiling a wall was a difficult job only for a tradesperson, then think again. Provided that the surface is suitable and you prepare it correctly, laying tiles requires no special skills.

YOU WILL NEED

Tiles, adhesive, grout, tile spacers, tile cutter, spirit level, notched trowel, pencil, grout spread, sponge, tile pincers

STEP ONE MEASURING AND PLANNING

Measure and plan your layout on paper first. Then make a scale drawing on graph paper. This will help you set out your design and allow you to work out the number of tiles you need if you're doing something tricky, such as a mosaic.

Use a tape measure to assess the height and width of the area to be tiled. Multiply the two measurements together to get the overall area. If there is a window in the room, measure the height and width, multiply these two measurements, then deduct the total from the overall area of the wall. Always make sure that you add 10% to the final measurement to account for wastage.

STEP TWO PREPARATION

Make sure that the surface you are tiling is dry and free from grease and dirt. If it's flat and level, then you are ready to start tiling. But if the surface is uneven, repair any cracks or blemishes with a suitable filler, allowing time for it to dry completely before starting to apply the tiles. Also remember to check for any dips or bumps in the wall's surface because they can become a problem when fixing the tiles later on. For instance, dips can cause a tile to kick out on one edge or corner.

If the plaster is new ensure that it's had enough time to dry (10-14 days, depending on the manufacturer). Read the tile adhesive manufacturer's guidelines as the plaster may need a coat of primer.

STEP THREE LAYING THE TILES

Turn off any power sockets, remove any electrical outlet covers, clean the area with warm water and dry it off.

Start from the bottom at one end of the wall. Apply a thin layer of adhesive with a notched trowel **(fig. 1)**. Work in $1m^2$ areas at a time to prevent the adhesive from drying out. If the tiles are larger than 300x300mm, spread adhesive on the back of the tiles too to ensure solid bed fixing. Lay the first tile in the corner, pushing it into the adhesive and positioning it with a slight twisting motion. Remember to leave a slight gap against the floor and any adjoining wall – wedge in the spacers to keep the tile in place. Use a spirit level to ensure that the tile is square. Next, position the second tile, using the spacers to create an even gap **(fig. 2)**. Press the tile in place as before, check it's level and apply the spacers. Continue tiling along and above until you've reached the edge of the adhesive and spread another layer over a further $1m^2$.

When you reach the end of the wall, you will need to start cutting tiles to size. Measure the gap, remembering to allow for the spacers, and mark the cut on the tile. To cut tiles effectively, score across the line, then snap the tile with a heavy-duty tile cutter **(fig. 3)**. To cut an L-shape, score the surface carefully and nibble away the waste with tile pincers. Apply adhesive to the back of the cut tile (rather than the wall, which is tricky at this stage) and press it into position.

Leave the tile adhesive to set for at least 12 hours before applying the grout.

STEP FOUR GROUTING AND SEALING

Mix the grout according to instructions from the manufacturer. Only make up small amounts to prevent it drying out and continue working in areas of $1m^2$.

Use a grout spreader to force the grout into all gaps **(fig. 4)**, carefully wiping off the excess with a damp sponge as you work. To smooth the joints between tiles, use a piece of thin dowel with a rounded end. If you use your finger, wear rubber gloves because grout can irritate the skin. Leave the grout to dry, then finally polish the wall with a clean cloth.

Seal joints between tiles and baths, sinks and worktops with a silicone sealant to prevent water from leaking behind fixtures. This sealant should also be applied to all internal corners. Allow a bead width of 6mm for the sealant.

Above left Wall-to-wall tiles are great for adding a spa feel to your bathroom

OTHER THINGS YOU'LL NEED TO CONSIDER

- **Remember to buy more tiles than you need to allow for waste. Before leaving the shop, check that the tiles are all complete.**
- Always purchase your tiles in one batch and work from several boxes to achieve a good blend of shading.
- **Always wear safety goggles and protective gloves when trimming and cutting tiles.**
- Tile cutting can take some getting used to, so it's worth practising on some offcuts first until you get the knack.
- **File down sharp edges with a tile file for safety when grouting, protecting your hands using rubber gloves.**

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