

# Care, feeding and fixing your garbage disposal



Photo provided

The bottom of garbage disposals have a circuit breaker button than can be pushed when the breaker trips.

**By Jim Hurley**

Remember Fred Flintstone's disposal? (Or am I just really old?) The little dinosaur would sleep under the sink, and they would poke it with a stick to wake it up to eat their scraps. We have evolved, but in principle your disposal is the same, right down to the growling, slurping noises it makes.

Of all the appliances in your kitchen, the garbage disposal works the least. This lazy machine sits idly by for hours on end while your refrigerator keeps things cold, the dishwasher keeps things clean, and your oven and stove make things hot for prolonged periods of time. The disposal waits under the sink for someone to turn it on and feed it.

Now consider that last sentence: the phrase, "turn it on and feed it," in that order, is all you ever need to know about keeping your disposal

running smoothly for its lifetime. The process is to start running water, turn on the disposal, and then push your scraps down past the rubber stopper. Starting running water before you start your disposal washes the debris down as the grinder works, instead of having to push a mass of pre-ground waste through the drain line.

Your disposal could run for a very long time if you simply turn it on before you put stuff in it. The empty disposal motor can get up to speed and then take on whatever you throw at it except, of course, for silverware, bottle caps, and fibrous food waste like corn husks and banana peels.

It might be a little intimidating to think of turning on the disposal before feeding it. There are those scenes in horror films where the disposal reaches up and grabs someone's hand and pulls them down the drain. Trust me, the disposal blades are four inches below the rubber stoppers at the opening and they stay there on the bottom. It is perfectly safe to put things in the top while it is running, just keep your fingers on the topside of that little rubber strainer.

But what can you do when you flip the switch for the garbage disposal and – nothing? Do not despair; the following steps can have you back in the grind quickly. First, turn the switch back off, make sure it is off because the next step is to put your hand down the drain and pull out the material you were trying to

grind away. You can always unplug the disposal under the sink if you're not sure the switch is off. Confirm that you did not drop a measuring spoon or bottle cap down there along with the food scraps. If the sink is holding water, the drain is plugged so keep removing the junk in the disposal until the water can run out.

Next, test to see if the disposal has power. This requires a quiet room. Turn on the switch and listen for signs of life from the motor, any clicking noise or hum is good. Quickly shut off the switch once you have listened. Did it hum? Good, you have power, but something is still stuck in the grinder. We'll get to that.

If it didn't hum, get a flashlight and look under the sink. Built into the bottom of the disposal, there is a little circuit breaker. The breaker has a button that pops out when it trips. Push it with your finger; it should go up and stay up in the housing. If it does, turn on the switch above and see if the disposal works. If the disposal doesn't try to work or even make a hum, check the circuit breaker switch in the electrical panel. If the circuit breaker is on, and you don't get any signs of life from the disposal, it's time for a new one.

When you have power and it still won't grind, make sure the

switch is off and reach in to feel around for any objects that should not be in there. If you can't find anything, or if it is wedged too tight to remove, the next step is to find a 1/4-inch hex wrench (typically one comes with the disposal).

Once you have that, look for the socket in the center of the bottom of the disposal, insert the hex wrench and twist one direction. If it doesn't move, try the other direction. If it is not moving either way, try jiggling back and forth a little. What you're doing is trying to turn the motor of the grinder to unstick whatever is lodged in there. If you can get the wrench to turn in a complete circle, you've got it! (Be sure to remove the wrench from the socket before turning the disposal on again.)

Make sure the disposal is off and reach back in to see if you can remove whatever you have dislodged. Then turn on the water and turn on the disposal. You should be back in business.

Jim Hurley is an independent handyman with over 25 years of experience in residential repairs. Hopefully this free advice is helpful to someone attempting Do-It-Yourself home repairs. The information presented is intended for informational purposes and for use by persons having appropriate technical skill, at their own discretion and risk.



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