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Choosing the best disposal

By Jim Hurley



Photo A. Scheck

A call to look at a "drip under the sink" took a nightmarish turn for me one time. Typically, the leak under the sink is a loose pipe, or a damaged dishwasher drain line. This time, the entire drain assembly had been in place for over 40 years. The drain lines had eroded to the point that there was nothing left but a thin veneer of chrome on the P-trap and pipes. Everywhere I touched, the pipe crumbled in my hand. When I went to disconnect the disposal, the whole bottom fell off. It was time for a new one.

People will ask me, "What disposal should I get?" The answer starts with another question: How much room do you have under the sink? Disposals have two basic features, noise level and motor power. The more quiet and power you purchase, the more space it takes under your sink. (Also, the more they cost.)

First, consider the noise factor. The whisper quiet disposal is more expensive than its lower-cost, louder cousin. Think of how often you use the disposal: How critical is it for you that a noisy disposal not interrupt your conversation for 15 to 30 seconds? Then consider the size of the unit. The super quiet disposal is surrounded with more insulation. This means it can be twice as large in diameter as the noisier one. If your under-sink space is needed for cleaning supplies or wastebaskets, you simply might not have room for the quieter model.

The second consideration is power. Disposals are rated by Horsepower (HP). When shopping for the unit, you can choose between a 1/3, 1/2, or 3/4 HP motor. Again, the size (and cost) increases with the HP factor, so if maximizing space below is a requirement, your best option is small and noisy. Motor power becomes important, depending on the amount of use. If you are constantly cooking and running the disposal for a few minutes a couple times a day, the smaller motor might wear out sooner. If you have not adopted my advice from an earlier column, and still stuff the disposal full before you turn it on, you would definitely benefit from more HP.

A word about installation. You can call your plumber (or a handyman) to replace it and have it done. They will appreciate it if you know which one you want or have bought the disposal in advance. The big box building supply stores also offer installation services at their customer service counter. The service is done by local licensed plumbers and might introduce you to the plumber you want to call back for future plumbing problems.

You can always do it yourself if you have a few basic tools and are willing to spend a little time under your sink. For the DIY job, consider replacing the old disposal with the same model (if you can find it); this will save you time. The same unit will attach to the old collar, saving that step in the installation, and the drainpipes will connect at the same length and height, so there is less to change on the drain. The secret to the DIY install is removing the C-Ring that holds the collar together. Once you've removed the old disposal, loosen the screws that push up against the base of the sink. Lift up the screw plate and remove the C-Ring, (the spring clip in the groove below the plate). This releases the rest of the collar assembly from the base of the sink. Or just call that family member who can fix anything. Yes, we all have one.



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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