

It's big business and most of us like to have a go. But not all DIY jobs are as easy as they look, and in the long run it can be cheaper (and quicker) to call in a professional...

DIY...or call in the experts?

LAYING A NEW FLOOR

WHEN TO DIY

Laminate floors are relatively easy to put down, particularly the modern versions, which come in kit form and click into place—no glue or nails needed. The tricky bit is cutting out doorways and corners, but you'll improve as you go along. Major DIY stores do leaflets or give demonstrations on how to go about it, which is a good starting point.

WHEN YOU NEED AN EXPERT

Laying carpet or vinyl flooring isn't as easy as it looks. With carpet you need a 'stretcher' to do the job properly, and vinyl tends to lift if it's not put down well. 'There's a knack to cutting both carpet and vinyl to fit,' says B&Q's Guy Burtenshaw. 'If you misjudge the angle on the edges you can take off too much and ruin the entire piece, or leave a fraction too much, which creates ripples.' Laying tiles isn't difficult if you stick to a few basic rules, but it's time-consuming, and you should get help if your floor's uneven. You also need a large tile cutter and safety goggles—don't attempt to start the job without them.

PAINTING THE OUTSIDE OF THE HOUSE

WHEN TO DIY

Only if you live in a bungalow and have lots of time! External painting's a long, laborious job, but you can save thousands by doing it yourself if you live in a standard rendered house. Preparation is the most important thing, cleaning all surfaces thoroughly.

WHEN YOU NEED AN EXPERT

If your house is higher than one storey, you'll need a scaffolding tower, so it's best to leave this to the professionals—most serious DIY injuries occur through falls from a great height. If you have rough or damp patches, an expert will need to treat the area, otherwise your new paint job won't last more than a few months.

REPLACING AN OLD BATHROOM SUITE

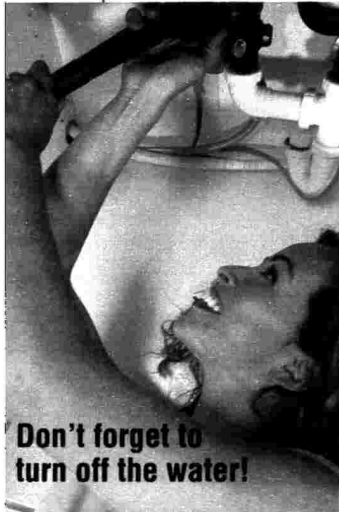
WHEN TO DIY

If you're replacing like with like, this should be relatively simple—assuming your plumbing system's fairly modern. Locate the isolating valves connected to the existing bath, basin and loo and turn off their water supplies before removing the fittings and plumbing in the new ones. If you don't have valves (and bathrooms older than 10 years are unlikely to have them) you'll need to switch off the water at the main stopcock and open a hot and a cold tap to drain off the water left in the pipes. If you have a hot water cylinder in the airing cupboard, remember to turn off its stopcock too.

WHEN YOU NEED AN EXPERT

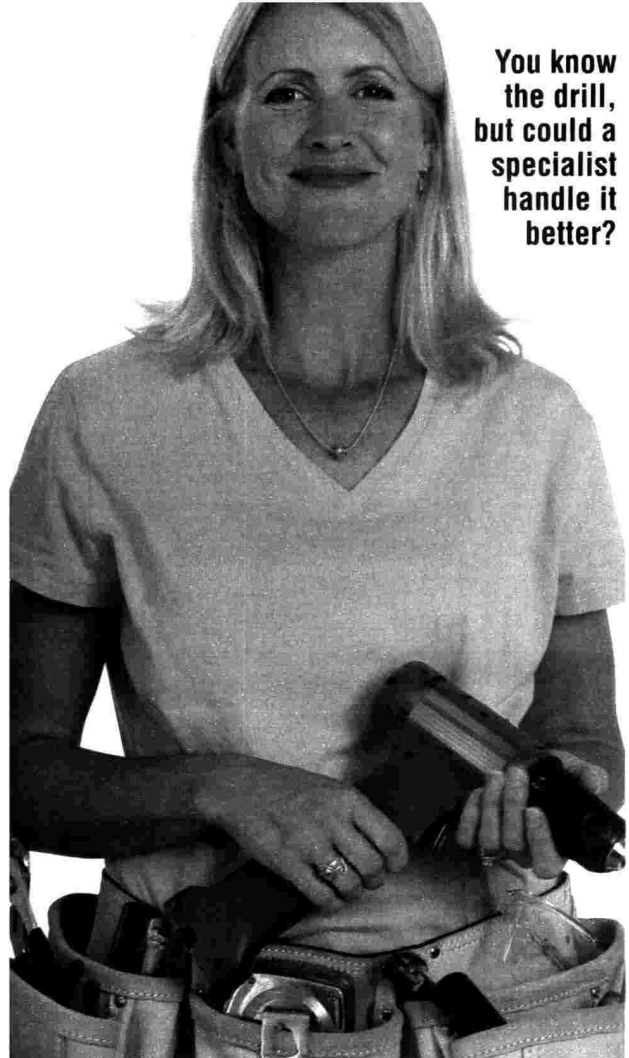
The longer the existing bathroom suite has been in place, the more likely things are to go wrong. For instance, old-fashioned baths can be heavy and awkward to move, and modern toilet bowls may not fit the existing sewerage outlets. You'll probably find all the plumbing is equally ancient, and that shutting off the water isn't straightforward. Always call in a plumber if you intend to move any fittings around, as this involves more than dealing with basic connections.

Pictures by Alamy, Photonica.



**Don't forget to
turn off the water!**

**You know
the drill,
but could a
specialist
handle it
better?**



PLASTERING

WHEN TO DIY

If you've only got a few cracks, or some rough edges that need smoothing over, you could try doing it yourself. But don't be deceived: plastering's a real art and not just something you can pick up in half-an-hour with a trowel and a tub of ready-mixed plaster. If you attempt anything bigger than a minor repair that just needs some wall filler, you're likely to end up disappointed with the result (see case history).

BEWARE!

HOME INSURANCE COVER may not extend to DIY disasters. When you get a professional tradesman to work in your home, they should be covered by their own public liability insurance if anything goes wrong. But if you attempt a job yourself, check the small print on your policy. Your insurers may not pay up unless you have Accidental Damage cover, for anything that goes wrong as a result of dodgy DIY. If your policy doesn't have the clause as standard, it may be worth paying the extra.

Don't spend all night on your tiles

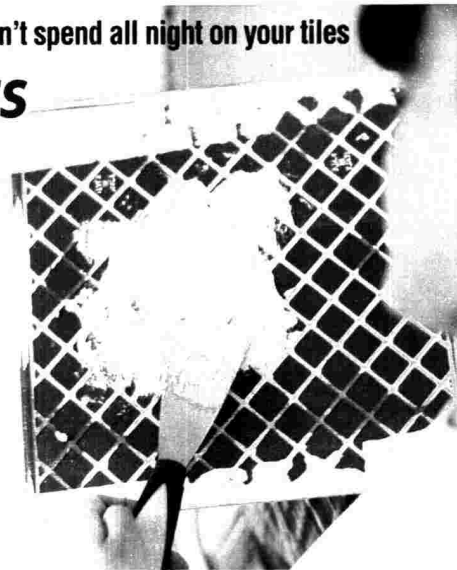
PUTTING UP WALL TILES

WHEN TO DIY

If your walls are straight and clean, have a go yourself. Wall tiling isn't difficult, and most people get the hang of it after a bit of experimentation. Cutting tiles is relatively simple with the right equipment (buy or hire a cutter); use tile dividers to keep the lines straight, and make sure you start in the place where your eye is first drawn, so that tiles that need to be cut to fit aren't the first thing you see.

WHEN YOU NEED AN EXPERT

If you live in an older property with wonky walls, tiling can be hard work. You may also discover that the wall behind the existing tiles is in bad shape, so if you take off existing tiles first you may also remove huge chunks of plaster. If this happens, get a professional in to sort it out, as anything you do will be a patch-up at best, and the tiles are unlikely to stay where you put them.



A WALL

WHEN YOU NEED AN EXPERT

If you want to skim part of a wall, let alone a whole room, then bite the bullet and get a plasterer to do the job. 'It's very difficult to get a smooth finish when you're re-skimming a wall,' says Guy Burtenshaw. 'It's one of those jobs that looks like it should be easy—but isn't, and the harder you try to correct your mistakes, the worse the overall finish.'



Home plastering may not always go smoothly



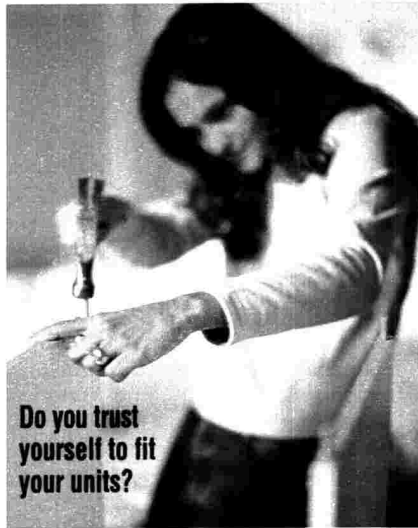
CASE HISTORY

Donna Bott, 40, lives in Amberley, Gloucestershire

'I tried my hand at plastering...'

When we moved here I wanted to turn a downstairs cloakroom into a study. The room had been damp for years and the plaster was covered with spots of black mould. I love DIY and I'll have a go at anything, so I decided

to plaster the bad patches myself. Plasterers charge for a minimum of half-a-day's work, so it seemed ridiculous to get someone in because it wouldn't take that long. I knocked off the old plaster, then went to a builder's merchant and bought tools and some plaster mix. As soon as I started, I knew I had problems. You need to get the mixture exactly right, then work fast to get it on to the walls before it dries. At first, the mixture was too sloppy and kept sliding down the walls, then I couldn't get a smooth finish—bits were too thick and bumpy. But I didn't know when to stop. I kept trying to spread the stuff until it was so dry it wouldn't move any more. Then of course, it cracked as it dried. I thought another coat would patch over it, but putting on this coat was even worse, and the wall was so rough I couldn't get it smooth, even by sanding it. Finally I put up lining paper, hoping that would cover it. The whole process took a week, and the result was so dreadful I had to knock the whole lot out again and call in a professional to put it right. He turned up, took half-an-hour to mix the plaster, another half-hour to put it on, then came back a few days later to finish the top coat in no time. It cost me £100, but I should have just done it that way in the first place.



FITTING A NEW KITCHEN

WHEN TO DIY

If all your appliances are staying in the same place and you're just upgrading the units, the job is definitely do-able. But get qualified technicians to disconnect the gas, water and electricity. If you're replacing units, make sure the measurements are exact, otherwise the new ones won't fit. The most important thing is to get the surfaces level and balanced, and if the units come flat-packed it helps to put them together first, before fitting anything.

WHEN YOU NEED AN EXPERT

Think twice about DIY if you live in an older property, because walls and floors may be uneven. You may still want help with the worktops, especially if you go for marble or granite. 'Natural materials can be heavy to manoeuvre,' says Steve Bushell, director of Urang residential developers, and a member of the Federation of Master Builders. 'An expert will get them level, make sure they fit perfectly and won't leave unsightly joins.'

WHERE TO FIND EXPERT HELP:

- **The Federation of Master Builders (www.findabuilder.co.uk)** has a search facility that offers a list of local builders. Alternatively, call the FMB on 08000 152522.
- **NICEIC** can put you in touch with a registered electrician in your area. Call 0800 013 0900 or visit www.niceic.org.uk
- **B&Q's website www.diy.com** has a 'How To' information section on tackling various DIY jobs around the house.