

Home & Garden

# Fixes for your tragic rental bathroom that don't involve construction



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The cramped, poorly lit caves that pass for bathrooms in many rental apartments seem to exist in a different universe from the minimalistic, spalike oases that populate Instagram. But there are ways to make your bathroom less tragic that don't involve making it larger or installing a window. "If you have a rental, you want to do things that don't cost much because you don't own it and you're not putting equity into it," says Mina Starsiak, co-host of HGTV's ["Good Bones."](#) We surveyed the pros for fixes that will make your space more hospitable, don't involve too much time or money, and won't get you in trouble with your landlord.

## **Ugly or cheap vanity**

Daily wear and tear takes a toll on bathrooms. Painting a tired vanity and installing new drawer pulls is a cheap project that can do wonders, Starsiak says.

Laminate countertops can develop bubbles with repeated water exposure; if it's really bad, Karen E Laine, Starsiak's mother and co-host, says removing the old countertop and relaminating is an option. Have a piece of laminate cut to fit the counter. Buy [contact cement](#) (\$13.98 at Home Depot) and a [J-roller](#) (\$14.79 at Home Depot), apply the adhesive, and carefully align the new laminate to the countertop before smoothing it with the roller.

"When you roll it and it all sticks down, you have a new countertop," Laine says. "It's not hard, but it takes focus, so you might need two people."

If the countertop doesn't need to be replaced, Starsiak says, you could get creative with wood putty and polyurethane to add interest. "You could wood putty it, sand it down, paint it or decoupage, get creative and do whatever you want and then use a marine-grade polymer to seal it," she says. That way, "anything you do put down, whether it's paint or pressed flowers, is sealed in." Keep in mind that these are both permanent projects, so obtain permission from a landlord and check the terms of your lease before starting.

For a reversible option, Starsiak suggests covering countertops and front cabinet panels with adhesive contact paper that can be peeled off when you move out. There are numerous durable options at big-box stores and online for as little as \$7. Just be sure to pick something that's water-resistant, such as vinyl. "You wouldn't want to put it in your bathtub or anything, but it would be okay on a countertop for a six- or 12-month lease," she says.

### **Poor ventilation**

Poor ventilation can make using a small bathroom unbearable, especially in the humid summer months. "It's tricky to create airflow without construction," says Jess Cooney, chief executive and head designer for [Jess Cooney Interiors](#). "You want to be able to draw the air from the window out into the main space." She said it's possible to use a trick that's commonly used in closets: Replace a solid bathroom door with a slatted louver door, which creates some airflow without sacrificing much privacy.

Or try a dehumidifier, which draws excess moisture from the air. "If you don't have adequate ventilation in your bathroom, a dehumidifier is your best bet," Laine says. Different sizes and styles are widely available at a variety of price points and retailers. Starsiak suggests turning yours on when you hop in the shower.

### **Old fixtures and appliances**

The protective glaze on toilets and bathtubs can chip and peel over time, and low-pressure shower heads and faucets can increase your time in the bathroom (along with your water bill). “A new toilet seat is a \$20 investment,” Laine says. “It’s super easy and it’s two screws.” A peeling bathtub is probably a sign of a previous repair that’s failed and is an issue to take up with your landlord, she says. Installing a new shower head is a simple but significant fix that can go with you to your next apartment (just be sure to save the head you replaced). “You might need a wrench, but you unscrew the one that’s on there, put some plumber’s tape on the thread and you screw a new one on,” Starsiak says. For appliances that require more than a cosmetic fix or tweak, contact your landlord to inquire about repairs (Starsiak says plumbing, electrical or appliance repairs are covered by most leases).

### **Not enough storage**

Many rental bathrooms don’t have enough room to store all the bottles and potions you and your roommates have accumulated over time. “A lot of times we feel like we don’t have enough storage, but really we need to be getting rid of a lot of stuff,” Cooney says. Once a season, she suggests culling your medicine cabinet.

Once you’ve narrowed down what you need, tuck clutter out of sight to help the space feel cleaner and larger instead of displaying everything on the counter. “I’m not a huge fan of a lot of open storage where you’re seeing everything,” she said. Find shelves and cabinets with doors to hide belongings, and check stores for under-sink caddies and storage boxes. For an added touch, Cooney suggests removing shampoos, conditioners and lotions from their original containers and pouring them into simple, refillable bottles. (Check stores such as HomeGoods, Target or Ikea.) “It visually tones down the space and makes it feel a little more curated,” she says.

### **Ugly floors**

The easiest fix to hide ugly tile or linoleum is to put down a rug, Cooney says. Pick something that's durable and absorbent, such as wool. "Choose something that will wear well in there because it's already kind of worn and has interest to it versus just your average bathmat," she says. Laine suggests something lightweight that's easy to wash — to curb chances of mold and mildew growth.

If you can persuade your landlord to let you re-tile your floor, Cooney suggests using durable porcelain tiles, because they don't show chips easily. Small tiles will make the space feel smaller, she says, so go larger if you can. "Keep the grout joints really tight because it's much easier to clean and for it to look good long-term," she says. She advises her clients to use the darkest grout compatible with their tiles to keep the floor from looking dingy and dirty. She advises against white grout because "it will never ever be fully white once it starts to wear."

### **Wacky colors, weird spaces**

Some bathrooms can look cold and clinical. To add interest and calmness to a neutral, monochromatic bathroom without using bold color, Cooney likes to layer with texture. "Get a really pretty, neutral linen curtain for the window and then get a nubbier, chunky bathmat and actually layer the textures that you have in there, but don't add color," she says. Keep the look consistent with quiet artwork and add interesting textural decorations such as coral pieces or baskets for a spalike look that still has personality. To jazz up an all-white bathroom, accessorize with interesting or colorful textiles and art.

Some older buildings have bathrooms that are configured in odd shapes or done up in loud colors. Cooney, an advocate of working with what you have, suggests embracing the vintage look. If painting isn't an option, adding an eye-catching piece of art over the toilet or putting up bold wallpaper draws the eye away from an unusual layout, and choosing monochromatic decorations within the bathroom's existing color scheme can help calm down the space. "If you're being bold and doing something interesting in there, people are going to notice your style versus the style of the bathroom," she says.