

A Comprehensive Guide To

How to Reseal a Bath or Shower

Mastering the Art of Waterproofing with
Silicone

Professional Home Maintenance Series
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1. Introduction: Why Resealing Matters

The silicone sealant around your bath or shower serves as the primary barrier between your bathroom water and the structural elements of your home. It is designed to be flexible, waterproof, and aesthetically pleasing. However, silicone is not a permanent fixture. Over time, it undergoes wear and tear due to moisture, temperature fluctuations, and cleaning chemicals.

Maintaining a perfect seal is crucial because even a tiny breach can lead to significant structural damage. Water ingress behind tiles or under the bathtub can cause timber rot, structural weakening, and expensive repairs that often involve ripping out entire bathroom suites. Furthermore, failing sealant often harbours black mould (*Aspergillus niger*), which can pose health risks and look unsightly.

The Anatomy of a Seal

A standard bathroom seal consists of a "fillet" or a wedge of silicone that bridges the gap between the horizontal surface (the tub) and the vertical surface (the tiles). This guide will take you through the professional-standard process of replacing this fillet ensure longevity and a watertight finish.

2. Identifying the Signs of Failure

Before you begin, it's important to know if your current sealant actually needs replacing. Here are the primary indicators that it is time for a refresh:

- **Discoloration:** Black, brown, or orange spots indicate mould growth within or behind the silicone. Once mould is rooted deep in the silicone, topical cleaning is usually ineffective.
- **Peeling or Lifting:** If the edges of the silicone are pulling away from the wall or the tub, the seal is "debonded," and water can now seep behind it.
- **Cracking:** Old silicone can become brittle and lose its elasticity, leading to hairline cracks.
- **Shrinkage:** Lower-quality sealants may shrink over many years, creating gaps in the corners.
- **Softness or Slime:** If the sealant feels gummy or has a slimy residue that doesn't wash off, its chemical structure may have broken down.

Warning: If you suspect water has already leaked behind the bath, check for damp patches on the ceiling below the bathroom before proceeding. You may need to treat the subfloor or wall before resealing.

3. Essential Tools and Materials

A professional finish requires the right equipment. Using a finger and some spit is a common DIY approach, but it results in a thinner, less durable seal. Acquire the following:

Hardware

- **Sealant Removal Tool:** A plastic or metal blade designed to strip silicone without scratching surfaces.
- **Retractable Utility Knife:** For precision cutting of old silicone edges.
- **Skeleton Gun (Caulking Gun):** A high-ratio gun provides smoother flow and less hand fatigue.
- **Silicone Smoothing Tools (Profiling Kit):** Different radii and chamfered edges for a uniform finish.

Chemicals & Cleaning

- **Silicone Sealant Remover:** A gel that breaks down residual silicone bonds.
- **Anti-Mould Spray:** To kill any spores before sealing.
- **Isopropyl Alcohol (or Methylated Spirit):** For final degreasing.
- **Sanitary Grade Silicone:** Specifically formulated for high-moisture environments.

Sundries

- Microfibre cloths, paper towels, and masking tape (optional).

4. Removing the Old Sealant

Ninety percent of a good seal is in the preparation. You cannot seal over old silicone; it will not bond. You must remove every trace of the old material.

Step 4.1: The Primary Cut

Carefully use your utility knife or removal tool to slice through the top edge of the silicone where it meets the tiles, and the bottom edge where it meets the tub. Be extremely careful not to scratch plastic or acrylic baths.

Step 4.2: Stripping

Once the edges are cut, grab a corner and pull. Ideally, the silicone should come away in long strips. Use your scraping tool to lift any stubborn remaining chunks.

Pro-Tip: If the silicone is very hard and brittle, you can use a hair dryer to gently warm it up, making it more pliable and easier to peel away.

Step 4.3: Chemical Removal

Apply a silicone removal gel to the thin film that remains. Let it sit for the time recommended on the bottle (usually 2 to 4 hours). This dissolves the bond of the last microscopic layers of silicone, ensuring the new bead has a "virgin" surface to stick to.

5. Deep Cleaning and Surface Preparation

Once the old silicone is gone, the area often looks clean, but it is likely covered in soap scum, body oils, and invisible mould spores.

Step 5.1: Mould Eradication

Spray an anti-mould treatment into the gap between the bath and the wall. Even if you can't see mould, spores are likely present. Leave the treatment to work, then rinse and dry thoroughly.

Step 5.2: Degreasing

This is the most skipped but most important step. Wipe the entire area with a cloth soaked in Isopropyl Alcohol. This removes oils and residue from the cleaning agents used in the previous step.

Step 5.3: The "Bone Dry" Rule

New silicone will not adhere to a damp surface. Use a hair dryer on a cool setting to ensure the gap is completely dry. If you seal in moisture, you will trap mould inside the new seal within weeks.

Important: Ensure the room is well-ventilated when using alcohol or chemical removers.

6. Selecting the Perfect Silicone Sealant

Not all sealants are created equal. For a bathroom, you need "Sanitary Grade" silicone. This contains fungicides that inhibit mould growth for several years.

Acetoxy vs. Neutral Cure

- **Acetoxy:** Smells like vinegar. It's common and cheap, but it can be corrosive to certain metals and might not bond as well to some plastics.
- **Neutral Cure:** Smells less, is more flexible, and provides superior adhesion to a wider variety of surfaces, including stone and acrylic. This is generally the professional choice.

Load Testing (Weight Management)

Baths move. When they fill with water and a person, they drop slightly. If you seal an empty bath and then fill it, the silicone will be under immediate tension and may pull away.

The "Fill Before Seal" Rule: Half-fill the bath with water before you start the application. This puts the bath in its most "compressed" state. Leave the water in until the silicone has fully cured.

7. Applying the Silicone Bead

Now comes the execution. Success depends on a steady hand and a properly cut nozzle.

Step 7.1: Cutting the Nozzle

Cut the tip of the plastic nozzle at a 45-degree angle. The width of the opening should be slightly wider than the gap you are filling. This allows you to apply pressure that "pushes" the silicone into the joint.

Step 7.2: Loading the Gun

Place the cartridge in the skeleton gun and pump the handle until the silicone is at the very tip of the nozzle. Wipe away the initial "blob".

Step 7.3: The Run

Hold the gun at a 45-degree angle to the joint. Start in a corner and pull the gun towards you in one continuous motion. Apply steady pressure. You are aiming for a consistent "sausage" of silicone that covers both the wall and the bath edge equally.

Note: Work in manageable sections (e.g., one side of the bath at a time) so the silicone doesn't "skin over" before you can smooth it.

8. Smoothing and Finishing Techniques

Smoothing is where the aesthetics happen. A common mistake is using a dry finger, which drags the silicone and creates a messy, thin edge.

Step 8.1: The Spray

Mix a solution of water and a little dish soap in a spray bottle. Mist the bead you just applied. This prevents the silicone from sticking to areas you don't want it to (like the tiles or the tub).

Step 8.2: The Profile Tool

Select a smoothing tool with the desired radius. Starting from the corner, pull the tool along the bead with firm pressure. This will scrape away excess silicone and leave a perfectly uniform, smooth, and slightly concave surface. This shape encourages water to run off rather than pool.

Step 8.3: Cleanup

Wipe the excess silicone from your tool onto a piece of paper towel after every pass. Do not put excess back into the joint.

9. Curing and Aftercare

Your work is done, but the seal is not yet ready for use. Silicone dries from the outside in (skinning) and then "cures" throughout.

Step 9.1: Curing Times

Most sanitary silicones are touch-dry in 30 minutes but require 24 hours to fully cure. Do not splash water on the seal during this time. Keep the bathroom well-ventilated to help the curing process.

Step 9.2: Removing the Water

If you filled the bath with water (as recommended in Section 6), wait at least 12–24 hours before draining it. This prevents the "rebound" of the bath from stressing the fresh silicone bond.

Long-Term Maintenance

- **Avoid Abrasives:** Don't use harsh scouring pads on the silicone; this creates micro-scratches where mould can grow.
- **Dry the Corners:** After showering, use a towel to dry the corners of the bath. Prevention is better than a cure.
- **Inspect Annually:** Check for any lifting once a year to catch leaks before they damage your home.