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Horrible banging noise in radiator.
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01-03-2012, 09:59 PM

#1

[CatherineZeta](#)

Join Date: Aug 2010

Guest

Horrible banging noise in radiator.

Not sure if this question is factual enough to be in GQ given that you guys aren't actually here to look at the thing.

Anyway- I live in an apartment in an old building that was probably a tenement back in the day, and in my bedroom I have one of those old fashioned radiators that's attached to the wall. It has a knob at the bottom that I'm supposed to open to turn the thing on, and some other strange knob on the side that makes a really loud noise like air escaping (although I can't feel anything) when I turn it.

The radiator barely works- even though it's "open" and sometimes feels warm, no heat is emitted into the room. Luckily it's not super cold in here to begin with (the rest of the apartment is warm).

The problem though is the noises that come from it. Sometimes it makes gurgling noises like water, and these are frequently accompanied by horrible banging noises that sound like someone's taking a hammer to it. They wake me up in the middle of the night and it's quite annoying.

I haven't said anything to the super/landlord as they're effectively MIA- the ceiling of the bathroom caved in and they wouldn't do anything for two days because they "don't work on Sundays" and then were "too busy" on Monday. My roommate (who knows them - I'm subletting through her) says she doesn't like to bother them, essentially because they're douchebags.

I'm just concerned that the thing is going to explode (slight hyperbole).

Has anyone had any experience with these things? Is there a trick for me to get the radiator to work, or do I have to suck it up and talk to the super?



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01-03-2012, 11:15 PM

#2

[wheresmymind](#)

Join Date: Mar 2010

Guest

The banging you hear is called a steam hammer. It is caused by steam condensing in the pipes, pooling, and subsequently being shot down the pipe by the pressure of the steam behind. Eventually this fast-moving slug of water encounters a turn and slams into the wall of the pipe, creating a bang. They can also be caused by shockwaves that propagate when a valve opens or closes, or when hot steam from the furnace encounters colder steam/pipe in the system. Google "steam hammer" or "water hammer" if you want to know all the gory details.

Suffice it to say that they're very common in hot water or steam heating systems (especially older ones), can be frighteningly loud, and are most likely to strike when you most desperately need to fall asleep. They're generally not dangerous/harmful, but if they happen all the time I'd definitely get it checked out, for your sanity if nothing else. Since they have a variety of causes, some of which are easier to remedy than others, I'd suggest talking to your super to get it resolved.



01-04-2012, 07:10 AM

#3

[Cheesesteak](#)

Guest

Join Date: Jan 2001

Steam hammer. My old house has a steam system, and had this problem for a while after we moved in. It's often caused by the pipes being plumbed the wrong way. The supply pipes should all be gently sloping up away from the boiler, so water can't pool anywhere. Once I fixed a sagging pipe or two, the system is fairly quiet, just hissing and a ping here and there. One of my fixes was just securing a sagging pipe with a strap, no cost and instant quiet.

Question, does your radiator have one pipe or two? One pipe is pretty common for a steam system, and the item on the radiator away from the pipe is the air vent. The vent lets air escape when the steam comes up, the radiator won't get hot if it's filled with air. Once all the air is gone, the vent shuts and the radiator is full of steam. When the steam condenses, it creates a vacuum and sucks more steam in, while the water drips back to the boiler.

Your vent may be bad, since it should not require you to turn it to vent the air. vents are cheap, under ten bucks, and you can do it yourself... If the heat is off and you can unscrew the old one.



01-04-2012, 07:32 AM

#4

[FairyChatMom](#)I'm nice, dammit!
Charter Member

Join Date: Aug 2000

Location: Southern Merrylande

Posts: 26,569

The first house I owned had radiators and I learned that when they don't get hot, you need to bleed the system. On mine, I had to turn on the water supply in the basement, then work my way around all the radiators on the second floor to bleed the air out and get the water flowing. Sounds like that's what your landlord needs to do. It was amazing what a huge difference it makes when the radiator is full of hot water instead of just air.

Sounds to me like you need to call the landlord/property manager.



01-04-2012, 08:06 AM

#5

[SeaDragonTattoo](#)

Member

Join Date: Sep 2007

Location: Chicago, Far Northsider

Posts: 5,065

In the meantime, if you're not getting any heat anyway, you can shut the radiator all the way off to stop the clanking. IIRC, steam radiators don't do well when the shutoff valve is partially closed, so the options are to keep it all the way on or all the way off. Otherwise the condensed water from the radiator cooling between cycles gets trapped rather than draining away, as described in posts above.

These systems really do need periodic maintenance, but because they chug along so well without much attention a lot of the time, many lazy landlords just let the tenants deal with the noise until there are enough complaints. Plus, many landlords don't really know much about the system, and have to hire a plumber to do the maintenance.

All that said, I love radiator heat! My apartment has 4 radiators, but I only have one turned on to keep it just over 70 in here. The bedroom's cool but not cold for sleeping, and if I were to turn on the one in the living room, it would be 80 in there.

I hope you can get yours fixed.



01-04-2012, 09:25 AM

#6

[Hello Again](#)

Guest

Join Date: Mar 1999

Third for steam hammer. However the water-gurgling noise is pretty standard.

It isn't dangerous but it won't go away unless the whole system is serviced. Which isn't going to happen in midwinter (the entire system must be shut down and drained, leaving the building without heat and at risk for burst pipes). So you can expect it to be exactly as it is for the duration of the winter. And even if the system is serviced, you won't know if it did the trick until the next time the boiler is fired up -- ie next winter. Basically it's a gamble even with a well-meaning landlord, and yours is a slackass.

I moved from my last apartment because the steam hammer was intolerable. (And I've grown up with steam heat and think the routine clankings and clunkings are a cozy sound). It could wake me from 2 rooms away, and to use the second bedroom, you had to have earplugs.

I advise you to break your lease now if you can't stand it. The chances of it being fixed are small.

Last edited by Hello Again; 01-04-2012 at 09:28 AM.



01-05-2012, 07:23 PM

#7

[CatherineZeta](#)

Guest

Join Date: Aug 2010

Thanks for the advice everyone. I had no idea what a steam hammer was until now.

As far as I can tell it has one pipe, but I'd have no earthly idea how to try to fix it myself- I think my best bet is to let my roommate who deals with the landlord know and hopefully the landlord can figure out what the deal is.

I don't think it's worth breaking the lease over- there are enough pros to my living situation and I hate moving anyway. Plus I only moved here in September.



01-06-2012, 01:46 AM

#8

[Nava](#)

Guest

Join Date: Nov 2004

Have you tried asking whether you need to purge it? If it's supposed to be hot water, then the same thing that's causing the noises is preventing it from heating properly; the air needs to be let out. At first it will take a long time until water comes out, and water will be gassy.

My mother's flat is her building's penthouse and they have central heating by hot water; since each of the radiators is the top of a column of radiators, we need to check for air and purge if necessary whenever the heating is on.



01-06-2012, 07:53 AM

#9

[Hello Again](#)

Guest

Join Date: Mar 1999

Quote:

Originally Posted by [Nava](#)

Have you tried asking whether you need to purge it? If it's supposed to be hot water, then the same thing that's causing the noises is preventing it from heating properly; the air needs to be let out. At first it will take a long time until water comes out, and water will be gassy.

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Typically (and I say typically because in reality each steam system is slightly unique) in pre- & post- war buildings (circa 1940-1960 - that's the bulk of my personal experience) it is not possible to bleed from within the apartment. The super has to open the valves at the top & bottom of the building to clear the pressure so the blocked up condensation can get out, and to do that you have to shut down the boiler.

But it is very worth asking if its possible.



01-06-2012, 10:01 AM

#10

[Malthus](#)

Guest

Join Date: Jan 2003

Perhaps check to see if the radiator itself has a valve that allows you to bleed the air out of it.



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