Water Heater Flush — Owner's Guide

The once-a-year job your water heater's manual actually requires: drain the sediment out of the tank before it costs you efficiency, a heating element — or a warranty claim. Print it and keep it at the unit.

1. Why this job exists

Your tank is a settling basin. Every gallon that comes in brings a little sand and mineral with it, and heating the water drops the hardness minerals out of solution — so a layer of sediment builds up on the bottom of the tank, fastest in hard water like ours in Pinellas County. That layer insulates the bottom of the tank (the burner or elements work longer for the same hot water), it makes the popping and rumbling noises people call about, and left alone it shortens the tank's life.

A softener upstream slows the buildup way down. It does not make this job go away — it makes it come up less often and come out cleaner.

2. The warranty part nobody tells you

Every major maker's deal is the same: the warranty covers a heater that was installed and maintained the way the manual says — and the manual says the sediment comes out.

- Rheem (rheem.com): flush your water heater once a year for most homes, every 6 months if you have hard water. Its use-and-care manual also says to drain a few quarts from the tank every month.
- A. O. Smith: the written warranty applies only when the tank is kept “free of damaging water sediment or scale deposits,” and its manuals state it flatly — “Heater failure due to excessive lime build-up voids the warranty.”
- Bradford White: the front of the manual says the warranty “is in effect only when the water heater is installed and operated in accordance with… these instructions” — and those instructions say to drain the heater through the drain valve until the water runs clear, because skipping it causes “lime and sediment buildup in the bottom of the tank.”

Skipping the flush doesn't cancel your warranty on the spot. What it does is hand the manufacturer a reason to deny the claim when sediment or scale is what killed the heater. Keep the date on your settings card or this sheet each time it gets done.

> **Safety first — read before you touch a valve**
> The water in that tank is hot enough to scald. The makers' own warnings say so. Power OFF at the breaker (electric) or the gas control to PILOT (gas) before you drain anything, run the hose somewhere the hot water can't reach people, pets, or plants — and never, ever turn the power back on until the tank is completely full of water again. Heating elements run dry burn out in seconds.

3. The flush, step by step

You need a garden hose that reaches a floor drain, a driveway, or a spot outdoors that can take hot water. About 45 minutes, most of it waiting.

1. Turn the heater OFF. Electric: flip its breaker off. Gas: turn the control knob on the unit to PILOT. Then close the cold water supply valve to the heater (usually on the cold pipe going into the top).
2. Let it cool a little. Run the hot water at a shower or tub until it comes out warm, not hot — that takes the scald risk down and empties some of the tank the safe way.
3. Hook the garden hose to the drain valve at the bottom of the tank and run the other end to your drain or outside spot.
4. Open a hot water faucet somewhere in the house and leave it open — the tank needs air coming in to drain (the makers' manuals say the same; you can also lift the relief valve lever).
5. Open the drain valve and let the tank empty. The first water out is the ugly part — that's the sediment leaving. That's the whole point.
6. Flush it, don't just drain it. With the hose still hooked up and the drain valve open, open the cold supply valve for a few seconds at a time. Each blast stirs the bottom and carries more sediment out. Repeat until the water runs clear.
7. Close the drain valve. Take the hose off. Close the relief valve if you lifted it.
8. Refill BEFORE power. Open the cold supply and let the tank fill. When water runs steady and bubble-free out of that open hot faucet, the tank is full — close the faucet.
9. Only now: breaker back ON, or gas control back to your temperature setting. Write the date on this sheet.

4. When NOT to do this yourself

- The tank has never been flushed and it's old. On a heater that's gone many years, sediment can be sealing a bottom that's already thin, and an untouched drain valve may not close again. That's not a warning to scare you — it's the honest case for having it done on a service visit, with a new valve in the truck if yours lets go.
- The drain valve won't open, drips after you close it, or is plastic and feels like it wants to snap. Stop and call.
- You smell gas near a gas unit, see rust streaks or active leaking from the tank itself, or the rumbling keeps going after a good flush. Those are failing-heater signs, not maintenance.

5. Two cousins of this job

- The anode rod: the manuals also want it inspected about once a year. It's the rod inside the tank that rusts on purpose so the tank doesn't. Most owners have it checked on a service visit — ask about it when you call.
- Tankless heaters: no tank, nothing to drain. Those need the heat exchanger descaled about once a year instead — a pump job, not a garden-hose job. Call for that one.

Don't want to do it? I do it.

Water heater flushing is a standing service at Aqua Pro — on a visit of its own, or added to your care-plan annual visit when we book it (it's not part of the plan itself; ask and I'll add it to the trip). Call or text (727) 342-0091. And if you'd rather learn it at your own tank with me standing there the first time, that's the Know Your System way — say the word when you book.