What plumbing problems show up most often in inspection reports?

The short answer: leaks, access issues, and code violations

When a home inspection report lands on the table, the plumbing section often carries the heaviest list of repairs. Three problems appear time and again: hidden leaks, valves that are hard or impossible to reach, and piping that does not meet modern building codes. Each of these can slow a sale, trigger a renegotiation, or even kill a deal if the buyer walks. Understanding what inspectors look for helps you address issues before they appear on paper.

Leak evidence in visible and hidden spots

Inspectors do not open walls, but they are trained to spot the signs of a past or ongoing leak. Stained drywall, soft spots near the base of a toilet, or a musty smell around a vanity cabinet all count as leak evidence. A slow drip under a sink that has been running for months can rot the cabinet floor and attract mould. Even if the leak has been fixed, the water damage remains visible and raises a question about how well the rest of the system has been maintained. The same principle applies to the shower pan: a cracked tile or loose grout can let water seep into the subfloor, and an inspector will note it.

Accessible shut off valves that are not accessible at all

Modern plumbing codes require that every fixture has a shut off valve that can be reached without tools. In older homes, valves are often buried behind a finished wall, hidden under a sink with no access panel, or painted shut. A valve that is stuck open or impossible to turn becomes a problem the moment a pipe bursts or a fixture needs replacement. Inspectors flag these because they create unnecessary risk: a homeowner who cannot stop the water quickly may face extensive water damage before a plumber arrives. Adding an access panel or replacing a seized valve with a new, quarter-turn ball valve is a straightforward fix that addresses the concern directly. Homes with accessible shut off valves in good working order tend to pass this part of the inspection without comment.

Pipe transitions and material mismatches

As plumbing systems are repaired over the years, different pipe materials often get connected: copper to galvanised steel, PVC to cast iron, PEX to copper. Each transition needs a proper fitting that prevents corrosion and leakage. Inspectors look for mismatched connections, especially where copper and steel meet without a dielectric union. That junction can corrode from the inside out, causing a slow leak that is hard to detect until the pipe fails. Similarly, a

transition from a rigid pipe to a flexible supply line must be supported so the weight of the pipe does not pull on the fitting. Simple code compliance on these points makes the system more reliable and easier to service later.

What a pressure test reveals

During a more thorough inspection, a plumber or home inspector may perform a pressure test on the water lines. This involves capping the system and filling it with air or water at a set pressure, then watching for a drop. A pressure test that fails points to a leak somewhere in the walls, under the slab, or behind a finished ceiling. That kind of finding often requires opening up the structure to locate and repair the leak. It is one of the more serious items a report can list because it implies hidden damage that cannot be seen or priced without further work. For homes being sold, a seller might offer a credit or arrange the repair before closing to keep the transaction moving.

Access panels that are too small or missing

Every valve, trap, and union that might need future service should have an access panel that is large enough to work through. A common complaint in inspection reports is a panel that is only a few inches wide, just big enough to see the valve but not to turn it. Another is a panel that has been painted shut or blocked by a cabinet that cannot be moved. Inspectors note these because they make routine maintenance difficult and emergency repairs nearly impossible. Installing a larger trim panel or repositioning a cabinet to allow access is a small job that can prevent a big headache later. Clean connections that reduce inspection concerns often start with giving each shut off and union a path for a gloved hand and a wrench.

Code compliance and outdated materials

Building codes evolve, and older plumbing may no longer meet the standard even if it still works. For example, galvanised steel pipes were common decades ago but now are known to corrode and restrict flow. Polybutylene pipes, used briefly in the 1970s and 1980s, are prone to brittle failure and are flagged in nearly every inspection where they are found. An inspector will note non-compliant materials and recommend replacement, especially if the home is being sold with a conventional loan that requires a certain condition level. Upgrading these materials to modern PEX or copper brings the system into compliance and removes a line item from the report.

Water heater issues that stop a sale

The water heater attracts close attention. Inspectors check the temperature and pressure relief valve, the age of the unit, and whether it is strapped to the wall in an earthquake-prone area. A

T&P valve that is dripping or has never been tested is a common finding. So is a water heater that is past its expected service life: most tanks last between eight and twelve years, and an inspector will note the manufacturer date. While an old water heater may still heat water, the report flags it as a future failure risk. Replacing it before listing, or offering a home warranty that covers it, can keep that item from becoming a negotiation point.

Drainage and vent problems

Slow drains are not always a clog; they can indicate a vent blockage or a pipe that has settled and lost its slope. Inspectors run water in the highest fixture and listen for gurgling in the lowest, a sign of inadequate venting. They may also note drain lines that run uphill or have too many sharp turns. These conditions cause solids to settle and eventually block the pipe. Fixing drainage slope is a bigger job than replacing a valve, but it is worth addressing because a sewer backup is one of the most unpleasant problems a homeowner can face. Clean connections that reduce inspection concerns extend to the drain side as well: properly supported pipe runs with smooth transitions and adequate venting keep the system flowing and the report clean.

What to do with the report findings

An inspection report is a snapshot, not a verdict. Every finding can be remedied, and many are simple DIY fixes that take an afternoon. For the bigger items, getting a quote from a licensed plumber before listing gives you a number to work with during negotiations. Buyers appreciate transparency: if the report shows a stuck valve and you have already replaced it, that item drops off the table. If it shows a water heater nearing the end of its life, you might offer a credit rather than replace it, letting the buyer choose the new unit. The goal is to remove surprises and keep the sale moving forward without a long list of repair demands that stall the closing.