HOW TO INSTALL A TUB/SHOWER SURROUND

Upgrading a bathroom is one of the best ways you can add value to your home. However, after you've checked out the costs of having a contractor come in to redo your bathroom, you might be looking for a less expensive alternative. While certainly not the same as a totally redone bathroom, installing a new bathtub/shower surround can give your bathroom a clean, new look at a price you can afford ($150 to $500). You can even install it one day and be showering the next.

Tools and materials you'll need:

- Bathtub surround kit
- Caulking gun
- Adhesive
- Caulk (mildew resistant)
- Carpenters level
- Tape measure
- Utility knife
- Power drill and spade bits
- Allen wrenches
- Pliers, screwdriver
- Green drywall (possibly)
- Drywall compound (possibly)

Choosing a Bathtub Surround

Bathtub surrounds are readily available at your local home stores. They're made from lots of different materials - ABS or PVC plastic, thick thermal plastic and fiberglass are just some of the options. Any tub surround will do a good job of protecting your walls from water. The thicker the wall panels, the easier the kit is to work with (and of course the more expensive it is). However, since the top priced kits are in the area of $500, opting for the more expensive heavy duty unit will make your life easier since it's more stable and easier to install. You're also more likely to get some extra molded add-ons like preformed soap dishes or corner shelves.

Another consideration when choosing your kit is the number of pieces to install. Bathtub surrounds come in either three- or five-piece kits. While a three-piece kit does require less work to install, the three-piece kits don't readily accommodate bathroom walls that aren't square and plumb. So if your walls aren't plumb (and most of them aren't), a five piece kit is more adjustable and should give you a better fit. The five-piece kit contains a back wall or center piece, two corner pieces and two end pieces. The extra two pieces give you more opportunity to make allowance for out-of-square corners or out-of-plumb walls.

Finally, choose a kit that is easy to keep clean. A smooth, low gloss surface that will wipe off easily and won't show water spots or soap scum is good choice.

Preparation
If your existing walls are solid, you don't need to do anything special to prepare them. A tub surround can go over virtually any wall that is solid - drywall, plaster or tile (just give your ceramic tile a good cleaning and a light sanding to help the glue bond to the tiles). However, if your bathtub walls are spongy or soft, you need to repair them before you install the surround.

Take off the existing plumbing fixtures in your tub. The faucet handles will likely have a cap in the center that can be pried up to reveal a screw holding it on. Simply take out the screw and pull the handle off. The tub spout itself may be held on with a small Allen screw or simply be screwed on. Feel around the underside of the spout for a small opening for the Allen screw; if you find it, insert an Allen key and undo the screw, then slide off the spout. If there is no opening, the spout is probably screwed on. Insert the handle of a pair of pliers or a screwdriver into the mouth of the spout and turn it counterclockwise to unscrew it.

Remove any loose or damaged tiles and cut out any damp or wet drywall. Replace with "green" drywall designed for use in bathrooms and damp environments. After replacing any drywall, finish it and paint it with a latex primer. The underlying surface for the tub surround needs to be level (no gaps or missing spaces where tiles used to be), so depending on the condition of your existing walls, you might be better off actually removing the existing walls totally and replacing them with new "green" drywall.

**Installing the Tub Surround**

1. Your first job is to establish a vertical reference line you can count on. Use a carpenter's level to draw a plumb line, running up from the outside corners of your bathtub.

2. The corner pieces are the first pieces of the tub surround to be installed. First dry fit each one, and if your walls aren't square, adjust the fit by sanding the edges (or trimming, if the walls are really out of square).

3. The panels are often held in place by both adhesive tape applied by the manufacturer, and extra adhesive you apply. Spread a bead of the recommended adhesive around the perimeter of the panel, about an inch in from the tape. Also run extras beads of adhesive across the back of the panel and around any built-ins (i.e., soap dish).

4. Remove the paper from the adhesive tape and set the first corner panel in place. Put one side in position and then apply pressure across the panel to the other side. Finally run your hands over the entire panel, pressing firmly to make sure the glue on the backside adheres to the wall. Install the second corner panel the same way.
5. Once the corners are installed, measure the distance between them, determine the center point and mark it on the tub. Now measure the center panel from the kit to find its center point and mark that point on the panel itself.

6. Apply adhesive to the back of the center panel and remove the paper backing from the adhesive tape. Set the center panel in place by aligning the two centerlines. Press the lower part of the panel against the wall and slowly work your way up to the top, pressing the panel against the wall. Then, run your hands across the entire panel surface, pushing it against the wall.

7. The first side/end panel (the one opposite the plumbing fixtures) will be attached in the same manner as the center panel, except the edge of the panel will be aligned with the vertical reference line you established earlier.

8. You'll need to cut holes for the plumbing fixtures before installing the final end panel. Measure carefully from your vertical line to the center of the various fixtures, as well as from the bottom of the panel to the fixtures. Measure twice, then mark the locations on the panel. You might want to use a piece of cardboard as a trial template because you can't make a mistake when cutting holes for your fixtures.

9. Use a 1" spade bit to cut the holes for the spout. Cutting the larger hole for the faucet will likely be a two step process. Drill a starter hole and then use a Saber saw to cut it to size.

10. Once the holes are cut, apply adhesive, remove the paper backing from the tape and install the panel. Put the panel over the faucet and spout opening first, attach the bottom first, then work your way up to the top.

**Waterproofing**

Even though the panels overlap and are designed to prevent water from getting in between them, you will need to ensure they're watertight. Use latex mildew resistant caulking all around the bottom edge of the bathtub surround (where it meets the tub), along the seams between the panels and all along the top edge as well (where the tub surround meets the walls).

Reinstall your fixtures, wait a day for the adhesive to set up, and you can start enjoying your beautiful new tub surround.