

If you just snagged a hot tub for sale and rolled it into your life, congratulations. You've bought yourself a nightly ticket to steam, stars, and a smug sense of wellbeing. The honeymoon glow is real, but the romance lasts only if you learn the maintenance basics that keep the water clear, the jets lively, and the power bill reasonable. A hot tub is a small, warm body of water, and water doesn't stay friendly on its own. With a little discipline and a few smart habits, you'll spend more time soaking than fussing.

I've installed, owned, and serviced enough tubs to know the difference between effortless spa nights and murky regret. What follows is practical advice, not lab lecture. It's the routine I teach new owners, spiked with real numbers, common mistakes, and the why behind each step.

The first week sets the tone

Most new owners treat the first week like a test drive. That's a mistake. The first week is when you establish chemistry balance and dial in routines that make the rest easy.

Start with a proper fill. Use a clean hose and, if your local water is hard or rusty, slip a pre-filter on the end. Filling through the filter compartment helps purge air from the lines, which saves the circulation pump from chattering and failing early. As the tub fills, check that the breaker is off and your GFCI is clearly labeled. Once full, power up, let the circulation pump run, and resist the urge to cannonball. New water needs balancing before anyone climbs in.

Balancing isn't witchcraft; it's order of operations. First, adjust total alkalinity. Get it in the 80 to 120 ppm range. Alkalinity acts like a buffer that keeps pH from bouncing up and down. If you ignore it, every soak becomes a chemistry roller coaster. Once alkalinity is in range, nudge pH to roughly 7.4 to 7.6. That is where your sanitizer works best and your eyes won't complain. Calcium hardness is next. For most acrylic tubs, 150 to 250 ppm protects equipment without creating scale. If you live with granite-hard water, add a scale inhibitor from day one. Then and only then should you dose your sanitizer and let the system circulate for a full cycle, typically one to two hours, before testing again.

Yes, it sounds fussy. Do it once and the rest of your ownership will be easier.

Sanitizers, straight talk

Sanitizer is the non-negotiable. The choice depends on your tolerance for smell, your skin, and your maintenance style.

Chlorine is the reliable workhorse. It works fast, tolerates bather load swings, and is cheap. In a spa, granular sodium dichlor is the usual pick because it dissolves quickly and is designed for hot water. Keep free chlorine at 2 to 4 ppm. If you soak nightly with two to four people, you'll likely add a teaspoon or two after each use and a bit more on weekends. Don't chase a perfect number; aim for a steady band and adjust to your usage.

Bromine costs more but keeps a steadier residual in hot water. It's kinder to some noses and holds up longer at spa temperatures. If your schedule is unpredictable or you prefer a softer feel, bromine tablets in a floater can be a good fit. Keep bromine around 3 to 5 ppm. If you switch from chlorine to bromine later, plan a full drain and refill so they don't feud in the water.

Salt systems promise softer water and lower daily dosing. They can be great, but they are not maintenance-free. Cells need cleaning every month or two, and your water still needs balancing. Ozone and UV units are helpers,

not replacements. They reduce how much sanitizer you need, but you still need a measurable residual in the water, or you are just marinating.

No matter your system, shock the water weekly or after heavy parties. Oxidizing shock clears out the invisible gunk your sanitizer kills. Use non-chlorine shock if you're sensitive to odors or soaking the same day. Use [hot tubs for sale](#) chlorine shock if things got rowdy and you can leave the cover off for an hour to vent.

Filters: the lungs of the tub

If water chemistry is the blood, filters are the lungs. They collect hair, fluff, leaves, and the microscopic scum that makes water go dull. A filter that looks fine can be loaded with oils, which choke the pleats and shorten pump life.

Adopt a filter cadence. Every week, pull the filter, hose it from top to bottom, and rotate it with a second clean one. Every month, soak the dirty filter overnight in a proper filter cleaner, then rinse and let it dry. Drying re-tightens the fibers, which improves filtration. Replace filters every 12 to 18 months, sooner if they feel greasy or the pleats collapse. If you bought a hot tub for sale from a showroom floor model, assume the factory filter did its duty during demos and start fresh.

A quick field test for a tired filter: hold it up to the sun. If light barely passes through the pleats, it's done. A new filter is cheaper than a circulation pump.

Water care that actually fits your life

The biggest maintenance mistake is unrealistic routines. If your plan requires a lab coat and a free hour every night, it will fail by February. Build a schedule that survives busy weeks and the occasional bit of neglect.

Daily, do a ten-second glance. Is the water clear, not cloudy or greenish? Is the control panel showing any error codes? Is the temperature roughly where you left it? Close the cover gently, not with a slam, and wipe any puddles so they don't creep into the cabinet.

Every two to three days if you're soaking often, or twice a week if not, test pH and sanitizer. I prefer a good liquid drop kit for accuracy. Strips are fine for quick checks, especially for pH swings. Log your numbers for a month and you'll see patterns. Don't chase tiny fluctuations. If pH drifts up consistently, dose a measured amount of pH decriaser and retest later, not immediately.

Each week, add a small dose of clarifier only if the water starts to look dull and you can't pinpoint why. Clarifier is a magnifying glass for your filter, not a magic potion. Overdo it and you'll gum the filter. If you see foaming, look at your habits before you buy products. Detergent left in swimsuits and hair products cause most foam. A quick pre-soak shower fixes more foam than any bottle.

The ritual of draining and refilling

Even with perfect chemistry, spa water gets tired. Dissolved solids rise, sanitizers become less efficient, and you end up dumping money into water that won't behave. For most households, a full drain and refill every three to four months is the sweet spot. If you host weekly hot tub socials, cut that to every two months. If you soak solo a couple evenings a week, you can stretch to four or five months.

Before draining, run a purge product through the lines. Biofilm is a real thing, and it hides where you can't scrub. A purge loosens it so you don't carry gunk into your fresh fill. Follow the bottle's timing, open the air controls, and let the jets run. Then power down, attach a hose to the drain spigot or use a small submersible pump, and

send the water downhill to a legal spot. If you used bromine or a lot of chemicals, don't dump on your prize roses. Never drain near a basement window well; water finds a way.

Wipe the shell while it's empty. Use a non-abrasive spa cleaner and a soft cloth. Check jet faces, pillows, and the waterline for scum. If there's a rough, chalky feel, you had scale; adjust calcium hardness and consider a scale inhibitor next round. Rinse thoroughly so you don't stir soap back into the tub, then fill through the filter compartment again.

Covers, hinges, and the quiet enemies

Spa covers do more than keep leaves out. They are your insulation, your child safety device, your evaporation barrier, and your first line of heat retention. A heavy, waterlogged cover is an energy leak with hinges.

Open and close the cover gently. If the foam core cracks, heat will stream out even if the vinyl looks fine. A cover lifter is worth the money if you open the tub more than once a week. Clean the cover monthly with mild soap, rinse, and apply a UV protectant made for vinyl. Avoid household cleaners with solvents; they age the stitching and invite cracks. Inspect the center heat seal. If it's starting to gap, you'll see more condensation and steam. Once a cover gains more than 10 to 15 pounds, it's living on borrowed time. Plan a replacement before winter.

Inside the cabinet, moisture is the silent enemy. Check for leaks after a refill. Even a slow drip will show up as a white crust on a fitting after a week. Catching it early keeps your insulation dry and your heater unbothered. If you see persistent condensation on the inside of the equipment bay in dry weather, improve ventilation or re-seat the vapor barrier.

Temperature, energy, and not funding your utility's holiday party

Hot tubs do not have to be expensive to run. They become expensive when owners chase big temperature swings or neglect the cover. The cheapest tub to maintain is often the one you actually use, because you notice issues before they cost you.

Pick a set temperature you like and stick close. Constantly dropping the set point by 10 degrees between soaks can use more energy than holding steady, especially in winter when the heater has to play catch-up. A comfortable range for most adults is 100 to 103 Fahrenheit. For long soaks or hot days, dip to 98 or 99 so you can linger without overheating. If you're away for a week, Eco or Sleep mode that drops the temp to the 80s is reasonable. For longer vacations, power it down after a proper cleaning and leave the cover locked.

Wind robs heat faster than cold air alone. If your tub sits in a breezy corner, a simple windbreak fence or a hedge can cut your energy bill and make winter sessions pleasant. If your hot tub for sale came with a thin base pad, consider adding an insulated platform. Heat goes down as well as up.

The chemistry curveballs people don't warn you about

Family visiting for the holidays? Expect your sanitizer demand to double. Teenagers bring hair products that make foam, cousins bring sunscreen residue in winter, and everyone brings a little bacteria. Pre-soak showers reduce your chemical bill more than any accessory. Keep a small sign by the door if you have guests. The polite version works best.

Pillows are pretty but they soak up oils. Remove and rinse them monthly. If the waterline keeps getting scummy, use a scum sponge or oil-absorbing disc. It's not a gimmick; it prevents the ring around the tub and keeps your filter from doing all the heavy lifting.

If your pH keeps drifting up, look at aeration. Air controls left open, waterfalls running constantly, and long jet sessions increase pH through outgassing. Close air valves when you're done soaking and run water features only when you're enjoying them. You'll use less pH decreaser and your sanitizer will stay happier.



Cloudy water in the second month is a classic sign of high total dissolved solids. If basic adjustments don't clear it within a day, don't throw a cocktail of clarifiers and foam reducers at it. Drain, purge, and start fresh. It's faster and cheaper.

Seasonal smarts

Winter owners in cold climates need a little extra discipline. Keep the tub powered and circulating. If you lose power and temperatures drop below freezing for more than a few hours, pipework can freeze. A thick blanket over the cover buys time. If the outage looks long, loosen the unions at the pump to drain the wet end and add a small space heater in the equipment bay, set safely away from anything flammable. Do not run the jets dry when power returns. Check water level, purge any airlocks at the pump unions, and restart according to the manual.

Summer brings heat and, sometimes, "why is my tub at 106 when I set it to 100?" Most tubs reject heat into the water while circulating. If your ambient temperature is high and the cover is tight, the tub can heat creep. To counter it, run filtration during cooler night hours, prop the cover open an inch with a clean dowel for venting when you're home, and reduce jet time with air valves closed. If you're using it as a cool plunge, drop the set point to the 80s and consider a shade sail to cut solar gain.

Quiet upgrades that earn their keep

A few small add-ons make maintenance smoother. A pre-filter on your hose is a hero in well water country. A spare filter or two turns cleaning into a swap instead of a chore. A simple logbook, even a note on your phone, saves you from wondering whether you shocked last Tuesday or the Tuesday before the barbecue.

Enzyme products can help if you host lots of bathers with lotions. They chew up body oils before they coat your filter. Just don't treat enzymes as sanitizer; they are more like housekeeping staff for organics.

If you inherited a tub with iffy insulation, add a reflective bubble wrap layer inside the cabinet, keeping clear of heat sources. It's not glamorous, but it trims losses. And if your hot tub for sale was a bargain because it needed a cover, spend the savings on a high-density foam core replacement. You will feel that upgrade on your utility bill and every time you open a dry, light lid.

Troubleshooting the usual suspects

Foam that won't quit usually points to detergents. Rinse swimsuits thoroughly, skip fabric softener, and give the tub a non-chlorine shock. If it persists, a tiny dose of foam reducer is fine, but don't make it a habit. If the water

feels slimy, biofilm is likely in the lines. Plan a purge and drain.

Rashes after soaking are not a rite of passage. Low sanitizer or a pH out of range is often the culprit. Test and correct, and let the sanitizer sit at the upper end of the range for a day before inviting skin back in. If you use bromine and have a known sensitivity, a chlorine system or a biguanide system might suit you better, but be prepared for different maintenance rhythms.

Heater tripping the breaker? Check for a weak GFCI, a wet connection, or scale on the heater element. Scaling comes from high calcium hardness and high pH baked by heat. If it's persistent, lower calcium into the lower end of the acceptable range and use a scale control product. A pro should inspect any repeat electrical trip. Water and electricity deserve respect, not guesswork.

A pump that hums but doesn't move water often has an airlock after a drain and fill. Loosen the highest union on the circulation pump a quarter turn, let the trapped air hiss out with some water, then retighten. If the pump screams or rattles, kill power and call a technician before it eats itself.

A maintenance routine you'll actually keep

Here's a compact routine that works for most owners without turning spa time into a part-time job.

- Before each soak: Pop the cover, glance at water clarity and temperature, close air valves after use, add a small maintenance dose of sanitizer if you had more than two bathers.
- Twice a week: Test pH and sanitizer, adjust gently, and rinse the filter with a hose. Keep a note of your readings.
- Weekly: Shock the water, wipe the waterline, clean the cover top and underside with fresh water, and let the tub breathe for 30 minutes with the cover open.
- Monthly: Deep-clean the filter in solution, inspect jets and fittings, treat the cover with UV protectant, and check for drips in the equipment bay.
- Quarterly: Purge the lines, drain, clean the shell, replace or rotate filters, refill through the filter well, rebalance in the right order, and verify GFCI operation.

That's one list. The second and last one can wait.

What dealers forget to mention when they say "set and forget"

"Set and forget" sells tubs, but it doesn't keep them running. Water is alive with chemistry and your habits. If kids hop in after soccer, you'll use more sanitizer. If a friend pours a glass of red a little too enthusiastically into the footwell, clarifier and a clean filter are your cleanup crew. If you turn the waterfall into a 24/7 meditation soundtrack, pH will creep up. Everything you do has a signature in the readings.

The flip side is encouraging. Once you know your patterns, maintenance takes minutes. I had a client who thought she was bad at spa upkeep. Her pH kept climbing. We found the culprit in ten minutes: the pretty laminar fountain ran all day. She moved it to an evening-only setting and stopped buying pH decreaser by the bucket.

Another owner grumbled about cloudy water every other month. He had a religious devotion to clarifier. We swapped that for a disciplined quarterly purge and drain, and the cloudiness disappeared. Sometimes the fix is less product, more timing.

Safety is maintenance too

Treat your GFCI like a seat belt. Test it monthly with the built-in button and confirm the tub loses power, then resets properly. Keep the area around the tub dry and grippable. If you installed steps, anchor them. Loose steps cause more hot tub injuries than any wild party.

Store chemicals in a dry, ventilated space away from metal shelving. Moisture turns chlorine buckets into clumps and corrodes anything nearby. Never mix products, and cap the container before you breathe again. If you switch chemical lines, read the dosing labels; concentrations vary.

If kids are around, keep the cover locked. If pets are around, skip floating feeders that look like toys. A simple strap lock and a posted rule work better than any lecture.

When to call a professional without guilt

There's a point where DIY becomes false economy. If the tub trips the breaker repeatedly and you've ruled out obvious causes, call a pro. If a jet leaks behind the shell or you find standing water in the cabinet, call a pro. If you smell hot plastic from the equipment bay, kill power and call a pro. Good technicians save you money by preventing cascading failures. Replacing a ten-dollar O-ring beats replacing a pump that ran dry or a board that overheated.

If you scored a used hot tub for sale and don't know its history, a professional start-up is worth the fee. A technician will inspect unions, test amperage draw, verify heater performance, and spot impending failures. You'll start on the right foot instead of guessing.

The two-minute checklist that keeps you soaking

- Water clear, not cloudy or smelly, with pH around mid-7s and sanitizer in range.
- Filter rinsed weekly, deep-cleaned monthly, replaced annually, with a spare on hand.

That second list earns its keep because it's the backbone. Hit those, and your hot tub stays a joy instead of a chore.

Owning a hot tub isn't about chasing perfect numbers or collecting bottles. It's about small, regular habits that keep the water clean, the equipment happy, and your evenings restful. The best part is the feedback loop. You'll know you're doing it right when the tub seems boring between soaks. Boredom, in spa ownership, is bliss. When something changes, the fix rarely takes more than a few minutes and a little common sense. Keep your eye on the basics and let the tub do its job: warm water, quiet jets, and a place to exhale at the end of the day.