

INFORMATION FOR HOMEOWNERS & RESIDENTS

- Facts About Sewer Backup Incidents -



Sewer backups are an unfortunate but common problem in U.S. cities and towns. Although municipal departments make every effort to prevent such incidents, they still may occur. The following information is offered to help property owners and residents understand why backups happen, how they can be prevented, and what steps citizens should take if a sewer backup effects their property. The following questions and answers may be helpful:

What causes a sewer backup?

Sanitary sewer overflows can be caused by a number of factors. They usually involve sewer pipe blockages in either main sewer lines or service laterals (lines between buildings and the main line). Causes may include pipe breaks or cracks due to tree roots, system deterioration, insufficient system capacity due to residential or commercial growth, or construction mishaps. In home and office plumbing systems, the main cause is accumulation of grease, tree roots, hair, or solid materials, such as disposable diapers or sanitary napkins that are too large for wastewater pipes to handle. Such materials may cause major backups in City lines as well as in residents' lateral lines. A frequent cause of water stoppages within the City's system, however, is vandalism. Leaves, sticks, rocks, bricks and trash have been found stuffed down manholes. We hope you will report observations of any such activity.

How could a sewer backup affect me?

If the backup occurs in a City maintained line, the wastewater will normally overflow out of the lowest possible opening, which is usually a manhole. However, in some homes—especially those with basements, or where the lowest level is even with the sewer lines—the overflowing wastewater may exit through the home's lower drains and toilets.

What should I do if sewage backs up into my home?

First, take action to protect people and valuable property:

- Keeping in mind that ceramic plumbing fixtures such as toilets are fragile, quickly close all drain openings with stoppers or plugs. Tub, sink, and floor drains may need additional weight to keep them sealed. A string mop can be used to help plug toilet openings.
- Don't run any water down your drains until the blockage has been cleared.
- A quick check with nearby neighbors will help determine if the backup appears to be in your neighbor's wastewater line, and/or widespread in your neighborhood. In this case, call the Department of Public Works immediately. Numbers are listed at the end of this flyer.
- Call a plumber if the problem is in your lateral service line.

If I call the city, what will they do about a sewer backup onto my property?

- You will be asked questions about the backup timing, location, the property at risk, etc.
- City personnel will check for blockages in the main line. If found, the blockage will be immediately cleared.
- If the main line is not blocked, you will be advised to call a plumbing or sewer contractor to check your lateral line. Maintenance and repair of the lateral line is the owner's responsibility. (See diagram below.)
- To minimize damage and negative health effects, you should arrange for cleanup of the property as soon as possible. There are qualified businesses that specialize in this type of cleanup.
- If the sewer backup onto your property resulted from blockage in the main sewer line, city personnel will explain what the city can immediately do to help take care of the problem.

