

COPING WITH SEWER BACKUPS

A sewer backup creates a stressful and emotional situation for the homeowner/renter. In some cases it may cause health and safety concerns as well as significant property loss. A proper response to a sewer backup can greatly minimize property damage and diminish the threat of illness.

The Town of Plattsburgh Water and Wastewater Department makes every effort to be responsive to a resident's needs and concerns when a sewer backup occurs. Unfortunately, because a sewer is not a closed system, many things put into the sewer can clog the system. Large amounts of grease and disposable wipes and diapers are common items that cause problems. While the Water and Wastewater Department has adopted rules prohibiting the discharge of any substance likely to cause a sewer obstruction, and can try to educate the public about the problems they cause, there is really no way we can absolutely prevent this from happening. Other factors can cause backups as well, such as tree roots, which can grow into and obstruct the system.

Many homeowners' insurance policies exclude damage resulting from sewer backups. However, some insurance companies do provide sewer backup coverage. **If you are concerned about the possibility of a sewer backup and want to insure that you are covered, the Town of Plattsburgh urges you to check with your home insurer regarding the availability of sewer backup insurance.**

General Municipal Law and the NY Constitution prohibits towns (and the town's insurance carrier) from paying for damage to private property unless the town is grossly negligent and legally liable. Unfortunately, many backups are the result of unknown blockages or aging sewer systems and the responsibility to clean up and repair damages falls to the homeowner and/or the insurance policy should it contain a backup endorsement.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you experience a sewer problem, please call the Water and Wastewater Department at 518-562-6890 (518-561-3370 after 4:00 p.m. and Saturday, Sunday, and Holidays) and state that you are reporting a sewer emergency. Backed up sewer lines, line breaks, sewage odors and overflowing manholes are considered an emergency.

If the problem is in the sewer lateral, the homeowner or business is responsible for correcting the problem. The owner of the property is responsible for maintaining and cleaning the sewer lateral from the building (or home) to the Town of Plattsburgh Water and Wastewater sewer main, including the connection to the sewer main. Locating the lateral is also the responsibility of the property owner. Several plumbers in Town have special locating equipment, which will be

helpful. If after hours, weekends or holiday and the problem is identified as the homeowners lateral a call-out fee will be applied.

If the problem is in the sewer lateral, whom do you call for help? You will need to call a plumber or a sewer/drain cleaning service. Check your Yellow Pages or Business White Pages. The Town of Plattsburgh cannot make a recommendation. It may be in your best interests to obtain several estimates.

REMEMBER TO CALL THE DEPARTMENT OF WATER AND WASTEWATER before calling a plumber. We will check the sewer main and inform you of our findings. If the problem is not in the Town of Plattsburgh's main you will be advised to contact a plumber or a sewer/drain cleaning service.

LATERAL vs. MAIN

What is a sewer lateral? A sewer lateral or house lateral is the pipeline between the Town sanitary sewer main, usually located in the street, and the building. The sewer lateral is owned and maintained by the property owner including any part, which may extend into the street or public right of way.

WAYS TO PREVENT BACKUPS IN YOUR LATERAL AND IN THE TOWN MAIN

The property owner can do many things to prevent the lateral from backing up. Remember too, that the very same things can help to prevent backups in the Town main as well. If everyone would be careful about how they dispose of certain products, our systems would be a great deal more efficient, cause fewer backups, cost us all less money, and prevent a lot of misery.

Grease: Cooking oil should be poured into a heat-resistant container and disposed of, after it cools off, in the garbage, not the drain. Some people assume that washing grease down the drain with hot water is satisfactory. This grease goes down the drain, cools off, and solidifies either in the drain, the property owner's line, or in the main sewer. When this happens, the line constricts, and eventually clogs.

Paper and Sanitary Products: Paper towels, disposable diapers, baby and adult wipes, dryer sheets, and feminine products cause a great deal of problems in the property owner's lateral as well as in the Town's main. These products do not deteriorate quickly, as bathroom tissue does. They become lodged in portions of the lateral/main, causing a sewer backup. These products should also be disposed of in the garbage.

Roots: Shrubs and trees, seeking moisture and nutrients, will make their way into sewer line cracks. These roots can cause extensive damage. They may start out small, getting into a small

crack in the pipe; but as the tree or shrub continues to grow, so does the root. After time, this causes your sewer line to break, which in turn allows debris to hang up in the line, thus causing a back up. One way to prevent roots from entering your line is to replace your line and tap with new plastic pipe. The other alternative is to be careful about planting greenery around your sewer line. If you have continuing problems with tree roots in your lateral, you may have to have them cut periodically.

Sewer Odor: Another concern that property owners have is that they can smell sewer odors inside their house or building. There are many ways to prevent this from occurring. Under each drain in your plumbing system, there is a "P-Trap". If there is water in this fitting, odors or gasses from the sewer cannot enter through the drain from either the property owner's lateral or the Town main. "P-Traps" will dry out faster in the wintertime when the humidity is low. Periodically check to make sure that unused floor drains, sinks etc. have water in the "P-trap". Another way to prevent sewer odor is to ensure that the vents, which are located on your roof, are free from bird nests, leaves, etc. When these vents are clear, the sewer odors will escape through these vents.

Illegal Plumbing Connections: Do not connect French drains, sump pumps and other flood control systems to your sanitary sewer. It is illegal, and debris and silt will clog your line. Consult a plumber to correct any illegal connections.

Needles: Unfortunately, some people dispose of hypodermic needles in the sewer system. The presence of these needles in the wastewater collection system presents special and possible deadly problems for wastewater collection and wastewater treatment employees.

PLEASE DO NOT FLUSH NEEDLES. The proper method of disposal is to re-cap the needle and put it into a "sharps container". (This could be any rigid plastic container such as a bleach bottle.... no milk bottles, please.) When it is full, tape the container securely, and call your local pharmacy for advice on proper disposal methods.

PLEASE DO NOT FLUSH THEM OR THROW THEM IN THE GARBAGE!

Install a Backwater Prevention Valve: A backwater valve can prevent or greatly reduce the possibility of a sewer backup. A backwater valve is a fixture installed into a sewer line, and sometimes into a drain line, in the basement of your building to prevent sewer backflows. A properly installed and maintained backwater valve works on a one-way system, sewage can go out, but cannot come back in. Property owners are responsible for the installation and maintenance of backwater valves. The cost to install one is dependent upon the type of plumbing in your home and the difficulty of installation. A qualified plumber can assist you in determining your needs.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: What is the Town's responsibility regarding private sewer laterals?

A: The property owner is fully responsible for maintaining adequate sewage flow to and through the sewer lateral, from the property structure to and into the Town's sewer main. When failure or stoppage of a sewer lateral occurs, Town crews will respond only to check the sewer main to verify that the main is open and sewage is flowing. If the sewer main is found to be clear, it is the responsibility of the property owner to call a licensed plumber or drain cleaning service to correct the problem. Verbal assistance and answers to questions can be received by calling the Water and Wastewater Department 518-562-6890.

Q: What if my sewer backs up?

A: If you experience a sewer backup, call us at 518-562-6890 (518-561-3370 after 4:00 p.m. and Saturdays, Sundays and Holidays.)

We will dispatch a crew to your address to determine if the stoppage is in the Town main or your sewer lateral. If the Town main is found to be clear, it is the responsibility of the property owner to call a plumber or sewer/drain cleaning service to correct the problem. The property owner is responsible for maintaining adequate flow to and through the sewer lateral from the property structure to and into the Town sewer main. If the blockage is in the Town main we will fix it as quickly as possible and keep you informed about what is being done.

Q: What about the mess?

A: A sewer backup can lead to disease, destruction of your valuables, damage to your house, and electrical malfunctions. Prompt cleanup of affected property can help minimize the inconvenience and damage.

You should immediately arrange for the cleanup of your property:

Warning: chlorine bleach can destroy various materials. Not all surfaces and materials are compatible with a bleach solution. The department recommends that you test an inconspicuous area for compatibility prior to use.

Clean up tips:

- Wet-vacuum or remove spillage
- Take before-and-after photos of the affected areas and Itemize any property losses
- Keep children and pets out of the area until clean-up has been completed.

- Wear rubber gloves and boots.
- Wash your hands thoroughly and launder clothes separately after completing the clean-up.
- Remove all furniture, loose rugs, and so on from the area.
- Saturated wall-to-wall carpeting (and the pad) **usually cannot be adequately cleaned.** They should be removed, wrapped in plastic, and disposed of in the municipal garbage. If you decide to keep the carpeting, hire a licensed carpet cleaning company to steam clean and disinfect the carpet.
- All hard surfaces, such as linoleum, hardwood floors, concrete, wood moldings, wood, and metal furniture, and so on should be thoroughly cleaned with hot water and a mild detergent (dish detergent), and then rinsed with a bleach solution by mixing eight ounces of liquid household bleach to one gallon of water. Let the surface air dry.
- Upholstered furniture, loose rugs, drapery, and so on should be professionally cleaned. Notify the cleaner of the problem.
- Remove and replace plaster, plasterboard, and lath that have been saturated and are soft to the touch. If the surface has been wetted, clean as you would a hard surface, but do not saturate the plaster.
- Clean sinks, dishwashers, and other plumbing fixtures that have had sewage back-up with detergent, and then rinse with the bleach solution.
- Disinfect clean-up mops, brooms, and brushes with the bleach solution.
- Increase air circulation to reduce odors and mold growth -- open all windows and doors.
- The use of fans and heaters may speed this process.

If household bleach is utilized as a disinfecting agent a concentration of 3,750 mg/l or parts per million (ppm) available chlorine should be utilized to provide an effective disinfection rate.

A 3,750-ppm available chlorine solution can be produced by adding one cup (eight (8) ounces) of household bleach (6%) to one gallon of tap water. Not all surfaces and materials are compatible with a bleach solution. **The department recommends that you test an inconspicuous area for compatibility prior to use.** Keep the bleach solution on the treated material for a minimum of six hours. Increasing airflow by using fans or opening windows will assist in drying out the area.

All safety precautions contained on the bleach bottle and within the attached document should be followed when handling any bleach solution. **Never mix bleach with ammonia based cleaning product; toxic fumes may be produced.** Wear rubber boots, rubber gloves, and goggles during cleanup of affected areas. Keep family members, especially children and pets out of the affected area until cleanup has been completed.

Any disposable sewage infested articles such as paper or cardboard, should be placed in a plastic bag and disposed of in the municipal garbage. If paper records are valuable, they can be photocopied prior to disposal.

Wash your hands with soap and water, thoroughly and often. This is especially important before handling food, eating, or smoking. If possible, use an antibacterial soap on your hands.