

# - Facts About Sewer Backup Incidents - INFORMATION FOR HOMEOWNERS & RESIDENTS

Sewer backups are an unfortunate, but common problem in U.S. cities and towns. Although municipal utility 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 affects their property. The following questions and answers may be helpful:

## What causes a sewer backup?

Sanitary sewers flow by gravity so they generally follow the natural slope of the ground. The sewer mains that the city owns and maintains are generally from eight to fifteen feet deep, with some being much deeper. Sanitary sewer backups can be caused by a number of factors. They usually involve sewer pipe blockages in either the city's main sewer lines or in the private sewer service line which the property owner owns and maintains (sewer line between buildings and the city's main sewer line). Causes of a backup 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, a frequent cause is accumulation of grease, tree roots, hair, or other 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' private service lines. Another frequent cause of blockages within the city's system is vandalism. Leaves, sticks, rocks, bricks and trash are sometimes found stuffed down manholes. We hope you will report observations of any such activity by calling 816-271-4848 to alert the sewer maintenance division and prevent an unfortunate backup from occurring.

## 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. 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 sewer maintenance division immediately at 816-271-4848.
- 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 service line. Maintenance and repair of the service line is the owner's responsibility from the house to and including the connection to the city's main sewer. The main sewer is owned and maintained by the City of St. Joseph.
- To minimize damage and negative health effects, you should arrange for clean up of the property as soon as possible. There are qualified businesses that specialize in this type of clean up.



The City of

**St. Joseph**  
Missouri

## Is there anything I can do to prevent sewage backup into my home?

- Avoid putting grease down your garbage disposal or household drain. It will solidify, collect debris and accumulate in city lines, or build up in your own sewer service line.
- Never flush disposable diapers, sanitary napkins or paper towels down the toilet. They could stop up your drains and may damage your plumbing system.
- If the lateral line in your older home has a jointed pipe system, consider whether the roots of large shrubs or trees near the line could invade and break pipes. It is a good idea to know the location of your lateral line(s). You can call the sewer maintenance division for assistance in locating where your service line connects to the city's sewer main. Your plumber may be able to help you further determine the location of your service line between your house and the city's sewer main.
- If the lowest level of your home is below ground level, such as a basement floor drain, it may one day be affected by a backup. One way to prevent sewage backup through such below ground areas is to install a "back-flow valve" on the lowest drain(s). You can also use a plumber's test plug to close these drains when not in use.
- For further information about preventive measures, contact a licensed plumber or plumbing supply dealer.

## What does the municipality do to prevent this problem?

- Every attempt is made to prevent backups in the public wastewater system before they occur.
- Sewer lines are specially designed to prevent accumulation and stoppages.
- In addition, we have maintenance crews that are devoted to inspecting and cleaning wastewater lines throughout the city on a regular schedule.
- Degreasing chemicals are also injected into lines in areas that are prone to stoppages, such as those near restaurants, apartments or high density housing developments.
- Even with our maintenance schedule, however, backups are often beyond the city's control. Most that do occur are confined to the sewage pipeline, rather than backing up into a home.

## Will insurance cover any damage to my home or property?

In the majority of cases, a special rider will need to be added to your homeowner's or renter's insurance policy to cover damages related to sewage backups or water damage. This optional coverage is usually not very expensive, but you must request that it be added to your policy. Check with your insurance agent about this policy provision.

As with the majority of municipalities in the country, the city cannot assume full financial responsibility for damages resulting from sewage backups, since most stoppages are related to conditions that are beyond the city's control. That is why it is important that property owners confirm that they are adequately insured - particularly if areas of their home lie below ground level. Call your insurance agent today to have this coverage added to your policy.

## How and where should I report a sewer backup?

Emergency crews are on call 24 hours a day to assist you. In an emergency such as a sewer line backup, or if you observe any vandalism associated with the wastewater or sewer lines, contact the sewer maintenance division at 271-4848.

Sewer Maintenance Division  
816•271•4848

2316 South 3rd St • St. Joseph, MO

Department of Public Works & Transportation  
816•271•4653

1100 Frederick, Room 204 • St. Joseph, MO

City of St. Joseph, Missouri

1100 Frederick • St. Joseph, MO 64501

816•279•4YOU

[www.stjoemo.info](http://www.stjoemo.info)

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