

Frequently Asked Questions About Waste Water

Q. What causes sewer odors inside the house?

A. Sewage has a natural tendency to produce odors. All sewers have some odors. The plumbing system in your home is designed to prevent these odors from entering the house. If you are experiencing odors indoors, it is likely that there is a problem with the vapor trap.

Q. What is the purpose of vapor traps?

A. Every water fixture in your house has a vapor trap. This “U” shaped pipe is clearly visible under sinks, and is present in some form on all lines draining to the sewage system. The “U” shape holds water, preventing gases from backing up from the sewer into the house through the drain.

Q. What is the purpose of the roof vent?

A. All houses have plumbing vents that extend through the roof. These vents allow air to flow both in and out of the house plumbing system, helping water to flow through the pipes. Working in combination with the vapor traps, gases from the sewer system are vented safely through the roof.

Q. What are some of the problems that can occur?

A. When sewer gasses are present inside the home, it is usually the failure of one or more vapor traps. The water in a vapor trap will evaporate if the fixture is not used for an extended period. Seldom used bathrooms or utility sinks are commonly the source of sewer odors. The simple solution to this problem is to periodically run a small amount of water (one or two cups) into the drain refilling the trap.

Q. What causes blockages to occur?

A. Blockages can occur for two reasons. The first is the accumulation of material inside of the line. Draining unsuitable substances through the sewer, such as kitchen fats and greases or sand, clay or mud, can cause a buildup and blockage in otherwise properly constructed sewers. However, the proper operation of a sewer line requires that the line be constructed “on grade”, that is with a consistent slope. High or low areas along a line will cause small amounts of greases, soap scum and other material to accumulate, eventually causing a blockage. “Clean Outs” provide the homeowner or sewer drain contractor an access point for sewer line maintenance.

The second cause of blockages is the presence of sand or roots entering the line through a break or other damage to the line. Tree roots will seek out sources of water, such as sewer lines, and will enter even the smallest cracks in the line. Roots will inevitably clog a sewer line. Larger cracks will not only allow roots to enter, but also will cause sand and dirt to enter the line, blocking the flow. As dirt flows into the line, a small “sink hole” or depression appears in the ground above the leak. These sink holes almost always indicate a problem with a sanitary sewer line or a storm drain, and therefore should be investigated or reported.

Q. Are there potential problems with older drain lines?

A. In general, most of the problems with sluggish drains, especially in older homes, are caused by damaged drain lines. Most houses built since the 1980s use PVC drain lines.

Q. How do I tell if it is a problem with the house or the sewer system?

A. Most problems with sluggish drain areas are caused by problems with the homeowner's sewer line. Unless there is reason to suspect otherwise, we recommend that you contact a plumber or use a drain cleaner to restore sluggish or blocked drains. Occasionally, a plumber will suggest that the blockage is in the County-maintained portion of the sewer line. In those cases, call us and we will investigate. If it is determined that the blockage was caused by a problem in the County-maintained line, your reasonable plumber's bill will be reimbursed.

Q. What other problems might happen?

A. Occasionally, vent pipes may become clogged. Nesting birds or leaves from overhanging trees can prevent roof vents from functioning properly. Gurgling sounds from the toilet may indicate a clogged vent.

Q. Does it make a difference how much water gets into the sewer system?

A. Any crack or break in the building sewer allows ground water to enter the sewer. These leaks not only create blockages for the homeowner, but also allow clean water to enter the sewer system. Once in the system, this clean water becomes sewage and must undergo all the expense of sewage treatment and disposal. Similarly, the discharge of water from a water-to-air conditioner contributes a large amount of otherwise clean water to the sewer system. A single water-to-air unit can contribute an amount of water equal to 40 single-family homes. For these reasons, the discharge from a water-to-air unit into a sewer drain is prohibited. Homeowners with cracked or broken sewers, or deteriorated pipe may be required to repair or replace the sewer line to eliminate these potential problems.