

WaterWatch



Facts About Sewer Backup Incidents for Homeowners and Residents

Sewer backups are an unfortunate but common problem in U.S. cities and towns. Although the City of Orem makes every effort to prevent such incidents, they still may occur. The following questions and answers are 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.

What causes a sewer backup?

Sewer backups can be caused by a number of factors. They usually involve sewer pipe blockages in either sewer mains (larger sewer pipes generally in the street) or sewer laterals (smaller sewer pipes connecting a building to the sewer main). Causes may include pipe breaks, tree roots, overall 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 sewer pipes to handle. Such materials may cause major backups in city sewer mains as well as individual sewer laterals. Blockages in the city's sewer system also occur as a result of vandalism.

Leaves, sticks, rocks, bricks, trash, and other debris have been found in manholes. Please report observations of any such activity immediately.

How could a sewer backup affect me?

If the blockage occurs in a sewer main, the wastewater will normally back up and 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 sewage may back up through the home's lowest floor drain or toilet.

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

- Take action to protect people and valuable property.
- Keep in mind that ceramic plumbing fixtures such as toilets are fragile. Quickly seal 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.
- Do not run any water down any water fixture, including the washing machine, until the blockage has been cleared.

- A quick check with nearby neighbors will help determine if the backup is in your own sewer lateral or the city's sewer main. In either case, call the Department of Public Works immediately (see the end of this article for phone numbers).
- When the city crew arrives, they will determine if the blockage is in the city's sewer main or in the sewer lateral. If the blockage is in the sewer lateral, you will need to call a drain service for help.

What will the City of Orem do about a sewer backup on my property?

- You will be asked questions about the backup timing, location, property at risk, etc.
- City personnel will check for blockages in the sewer main. If found, the blockage will be immediately cleared.
- If the sewer main is not blocked, you will be advised to call a drain service to check your sewer lateral. Maintenance and repair of the sewer lateral is the owner's responsibility (see the diagram on page 2).
- To minimize damages and nega-

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If you wouldn't drink it, don't dump it!

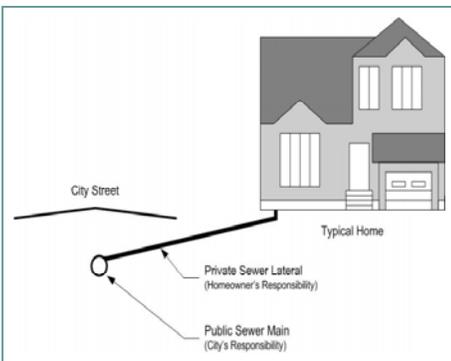
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www.orem.org

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tive health effects, you should arrange for cleanup as soon as possible. There are qualified businesses that specialize in this type of cleanup.

- If the sewer backup resulted from a blockage in the city's sewer main, city personnel will explain what the city can immediately do to help take care of the problem.



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

- Avoid putting grease down your garbage disposal or household drain. It can solidify, collect debris, build up in your own lateral, and accumulate in city sewer mains.

- Never flush disposable diapers, sanitary napkins, or paper towels down the toilet. They could clog your drains and damage your plumbing system.
- If the sewer lateral in your older home has a jointed pipe system, consider whether the roots of large shrubs or trees near the lateral are invading or breaking the lateral. It is also a good idea to know the location of your sewer lateral.
- 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 backflow valve on the lowest drain. 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 plumber or plumbing supply dealer.

What does the municipality do to prevent this problem?

- Every attempt is made to prevent backups in the public sewer system before they occur in the home. For example:
- Sewer mains are designed at self-cleansing velocities in order to prevent accumulation and blockages.
- The sewer maintenance crews inspect sewer mains with closed-circuit television cameras throughout the city on a regular basis to detect invasive root problems, grease build up, differential pipe settlements, pipe breaks, groundwater infiltration, or other problems.
- As a result, crews have identified sewer mains that have recurring problems and clean them on a routine basis.
- Degreasing chemicals are injected

into lines in areas that are prone to stoppages, such as those near restaurants, apartments, or high-density housing developments.

- Where roots have entered the sewer main, crews will either cut and remove the roots or kill them with chemicals.
- Even with this maintenance program, backups are often beyond the city's control. Most that do occur are confined to the sewer main and do not back into a home.

Will insurance cover damage to my home or property?

In most 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 normally request that it be added to your policy. Check with your insurance agent about this policy provision.

The City of Orem cannot assume 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. Contact your insurance agent if you have any other questions regarding this special rider.

How 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 backup or if you observe any vandalism associated with the sewer mains or manholes, please contact the city immediately. From 7:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. on Monday through Friday, call (801) 229-7481. Otherwise, call (801) 229-7070 outside these times, on weekends, or during holidays.