

A Guide to Sewer Backups



Township of Verona
Department of Public Works

General Information

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. Properly responding to a sewer backup can greatly minimize property damage and reduce the threat of illness.

The Township of Verona makes every effort to be responsive to a resident's needs and concerns when a sewer backup occurs. Because a sewer is not a closed system, many things put into the sewer can clog the system. Grease and diapers are two common items that cause problems. While the Township can try to educate the public of the problems that arise from improperly disposing of items down the drain, there is no way to prevent a backup from ever happening. In addition, other factors can also lead to backups, such include 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 Township urges you to check with your home insurer regarding the availability of sewer backup insurance.

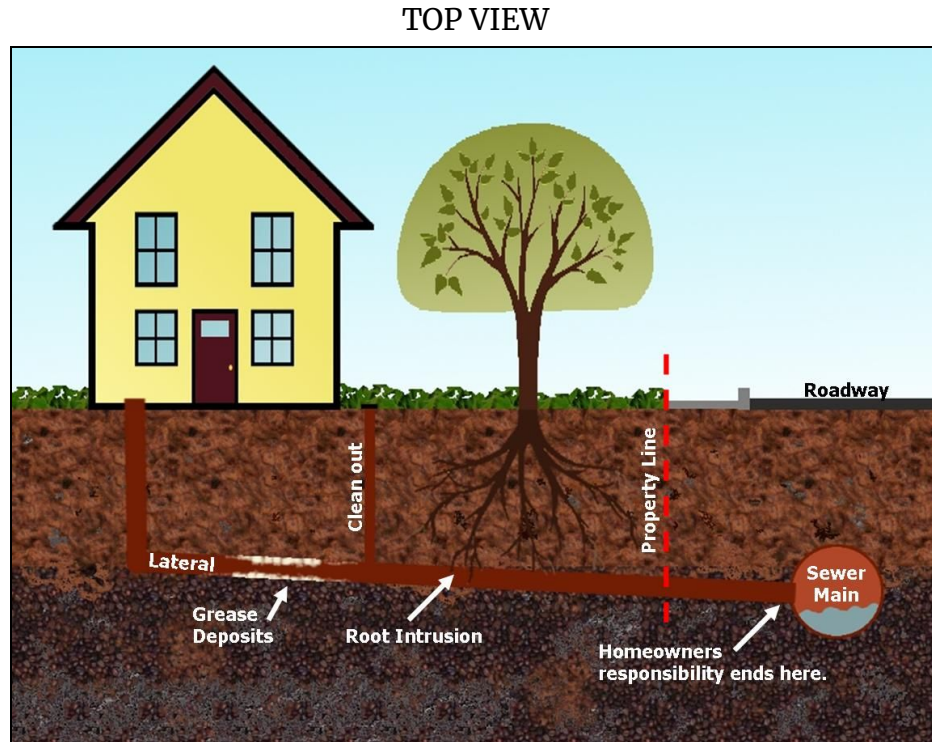
The Township of Verona does not carry "No-Fault" Insurance coverage. Property owners who experience a sewer back-up should file a claim with their respective homeowner's insurance carrier if they wish to seek possible compensation for damages. Property owners who feel they want to file a claim with the Township should contact the Manager's office at (973)847-4767 or download a Tort Claim Form [here](#).

Contact Information

If you experience a sewer problem, please call the Department of Public Works at (973)857-4804 and state that you are reporting a sewer emergency. If there is nobody at public works, contact the Police Department at (973) 239-5000. Backed up sewer lines, line breaks, sewage odors and overflowing manholes are considered an emergency. If the problem is found to be in the sewer lateral, the homeowner or business will be 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 Township's sewer main, including the connection on the sewer main. Locating the lateral is also the responsibility of the property owner. Several plumbers have the capability to locate laterals with the use of special locating equipment.

Lateral vs. Main

A sewer lateral or house lateral is the pipeline between the Township 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.



More often than not, the cause of a backup in your lateral is from items that the line is not designed to handle. This could include items such as children's toys, underwear, towels, diapers, paper products (other than toilet paper), keys and even false teeth. To avoid flushing these items, remember to close the toilet lid. What you flush down your toilet may not always affect you, but it might cause problems for your neighbors! A backup may also be caused if you have roots in your lateral.

Ways to Prevent Backups in Your Lateral and in the Township Main

The property owner can do many things to prevent his/her lateral from backing up. The very same things a property owner can do to prevent a back up in his/her lateral can also help to prevent backups in the Township main as well. When everyone is careful about how they dispose of certain products, the entire system is a great deal more efficient, it causes fewer backups, saves money, and prevents stress.

- **Grease:** Cooking oil should be poured into a heat-resistant container and disposed of, after it cools off, in the garbage, not the drain. Washing grease down the drain with hot water is NOT satisfactory. Hot 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 Products:** Paper towels, diapers, and feminine products cause a great deal of problems in the property owner's lateral as well as in the Township's main. These products do not deteriorate quickly, as does bathroom tissue. 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, 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. In time, this can cause your sewer line to break, allowing debris to hang up in the line, thus causing a backup. One way to prevent roots from entering your line is to replace your line and tap with a new plastic pipe. The other alternative is to be careful about planting greenery around your sewer line. Another option may be to purchase a product containing "copper sulfate", to pour down your drain. This product should be used with extreme caution. If you have continuing problems with tree roots in your lateral, you may have to cut them periodically.
- **Sewer Odor:** Another common concern among property owners 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 should be 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 City main. 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. This practice is prohibited. It can cause debris and silt to clog your line. Consult a plumber to correct any prohibited connections.
- **Needles:** 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 collections 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”. When the container 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 INTO 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 City's sewer main. When failure or stoppage of a sewer lateral occurs, an employee from the Department of Public Works 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 Department of Public Works at (973) 857-4804.

Q: If I notice a foreign substance flowing into a storm drain inlet, who should I call?

A: If you notice a foreign substance flowing into a storm drain inlet, please call the Department of Public Works at (973) 857-4804.

Q: What should I do if my sewer backs up?

A: If you experience a sewer backup, call the Township of Verona Public Works Department at (973) 857-4804. We will dispatch a maintenance crew to your address to determine if the stoppage is in the City main or your sewer lateral. If the City 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 City sewer main. If the blockage is in the City main, we will fix it as quickly as possible and keep you informed about what work is being done.

Q: What should I do about the mess?

A: A sewer backup can lead to disease, destruction of personal items, damage to your house, and electrical malfunctions. The following steps should be followed to help minimize the inconvenience and damage associated with the sewer backup.

- Take before-and-after photos of the affected areas
- Itemize any property losses
- Wet-vacuum or remove spillage
- Mop the floors and wipe walls with soap and disinfectant
- Flush out and disinfect plumbing fixtures
- Steam clean or remove carpet and drapes
- Repair or remove wallboard or wall covering

- Clean up appliances or ductwork.

Q: What is a lateral?

A: All homes and businesses connected to sanitary sewer systems have a lateral. It's the pipe that transports water used inside your home out to your city's sanitary sewer system in the street (see the pipe highlighted in the picture below).

Just like roofs and driveways, maintaining a lateral is the homeowners responsibility. Some communities require homeowners to repair and maintain laterals from the house out to around the sidewalk or tree lawn, what's known as the right of way. In other communities, homeowners own the lateral from the house all the way to where it connects to the city's sewer system in the street. Check with your city to find out.

Q: How Do Laterals Play a Role in Basement Backups?

A: Laterals are only supposed to carry water you use in your house out to the city's sanitary sewer pipe. Cracks and leaks in laterals end up allowing too much excess ground water into city owned pipes, which can overwhelm the overall sewer system and cause stormwater and wastewater to backup in the sewer system and into people's basements.

Q: How Can I Tell if My Lateral is Cracked or Leaking?

A: If you have ever had to call a plumber to unclog your lateral, you most likely have a leaky lateral. Tree roots are always seeking water and end up growing through cracks in laterals. The roots end up accumulating things that are flushed or poured down the drains in your home, leading to a clogged pipe. You can tell when your lateral is clogged when water backs up into your basement during dry weather. It's the water you used in the home that cannot get out the lateral to the city's sanitary sewer in the street.

You can also check for leaks and cracks by having a plumbing company run a television camera through your lateral. You will be able to see any major problems right away. Identifying smaller cracks may require soaking your front lawn with water and an environmentally friendly green dye. When the camera views green water in the lateral, you know there are leaks in the pipe.

Q: How Should I Maintain My Lateral?

A: You should have your lateral inspected every five to ten years, depending on the age of your home. Newer laterals are made out of PVC, a high-strength plastic that is slightly flexible. PVC pipes for home laterals come in 10 foot lengths and have long lasting, water-tight joints if installed properly. Plumbers started installing PVC laterals in Wisconsin in the 1970's.

Older laterals may be made out of clay pipes that were typically installed in two foot sections. Joints and cracks on clay pipes tend to fail over time, allowing large gaps to permit excess water into the sanitary sewer system.

Q: How Do I Know if a Basement Backup is From Too Much Rain or a Clogged Lateral?

A: If it's not raining and you get water backing up into your basement through the floor drain, there's a good chance you have a clogged lateral. The water that you used inside your home cannot get through the lateral and empty into the city's sewer out in the street.

Even if it is raining and you have water coming through the floor drain, you could still have a clogged lateral that needs to be cleaned out. When basement backups occur because of capacity issues in the sanitary sewer system, they usually impact more than one home on the block. Contact your city or village department of public works right away so they can check to see if there are any problems with the public sewer out in the street.

Q: What's the Fix if My Lateral Needs Repairs?

A: There are many newer repair techniques that do not require digging a large trench in your front yard. However, laterals in substantial disrepair may require digging a trench to install a new pipe from the street to the foundation of your home.