

# A Guide to Sewer Backups



Township of Verona  
Department of Public Works

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Verona, New Jersey 07044

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[www.VeronaNJ.org](http://www.VeronaNJ.org)

## **General Information**

A sanitary 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 damage/loss. Properly responding to a sanitary 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 and property owner's needs and concerns when a sanitary sewer backup occurs. Because a sanitary sewer is not a closed system, many things put into the sanitary sewer can clog the system. Diapers, grease and rags are three 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, natural factors can also lead to backups, such include tree root intrusion, 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, sometimes called "service line 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 homeowner's insurance broker regarding the availability of sewer backup/service line coverage.

Pursuant to the New Jersey Tort Claim Act all residents/property owners are directed to file a claim with their respective homeowner's insurance carrier if they wish to seek possible compensation for damages. Property owners who experience a sewer backup and believe the backup is the responsibility of the Township's are directed to file a Tort Claim with the Office of the Township Manager. Please note, even if you believe the Township is responsible for the damage, the residents/property owners homeowner's/property insurance must be notified.

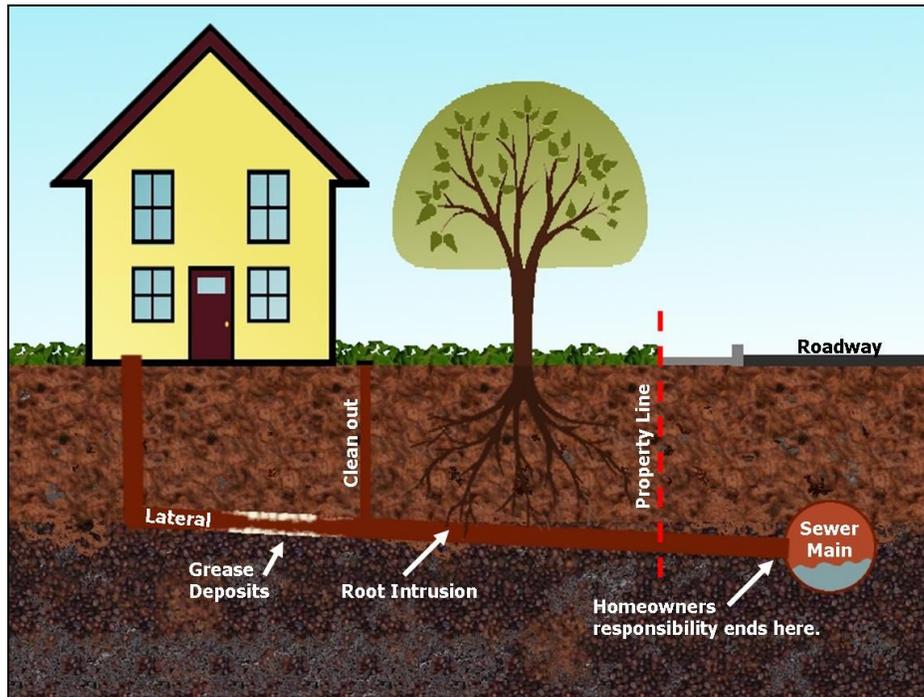
## **Contact Information**

If you experience a sanitary sewer backup, contact the Department of Public Works at (973) 857-4804. After hours response from the Department of Public Works by contacting the Verona Police Department at (973) 239-5000. We will dispatch a maintenance crew to your address to determine if the stoppage is in the Township's sanitary sewer main or your private sewer lateral.

If the Township sanitary 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. The property owner is responsible for maintaining adequate flow to and through the sewer lateral from the property structure to and into the Township sanitary sewer main. If the blockage is in the Township main, we will fix it as quickly as possible and keep you informed about what work is being done.

## Sanitary Sewer Lateral vs. Sanitary Sewer Main

A sanitary 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 by natural problems such as root intrusion, which are tree roots that have grown into the sanitary sewer lateral.

## Ways to Prevent Backups in Your Sanitary Sewer Lateral and in the Township Sanitary Sewer Main

Property owner' can do many things to prevent his/her sanitary sewer 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 sanitary sewer 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 PROHIBITED. Hot grease goes down the drain, cools off, and solidifies either

in the drain, the property owner's sanitary sewer lateral, or in the sanitary sewer main. 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 sanitary sewer lateral as well as in the Township's sanitary sewer main. These products do not deteriorate as quickly as does 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, 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 sanitary sewer lateral 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 sanitary sewer lateral or the Township's sanitary sewer 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 by law. Illegal connections can cause debris and silt to clog your line. Consult a licensed 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 collection and wastewater treatment employees. The proper method of disposal is to dispose of the needle in an approved "sharps container". When the container is full, tape the container securely and dispose of properly. Consult 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 licensed plumber can assist you in determining your needs.

### Frequently Asked Questions:

**Q: What is the Township's responsibility regarding private sanitary sewer laterals?**

A: Private property owners are fully responsible for maintaining adequate sewage flow to and through the sewer lateral, from the property structure to and into the Township's sanitary sewer main. When failure or stoppage of a sanitary sewer lateral occurs, an employee from the Department of Public Works will respond only to check the sanitary sewer main to verify that the main is open and sewage is flowing. If the sanitary 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. After hours response from the Department of Public Works by contacting the Verona Police Department at 973-239-5000.

**Q: If I notice a foreign substance flowing into a storm water drain inlet, whom 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. After hours response from the Department of Public Works by contacting the Verona Police Department at (973) 239-5000.

**Q: What should I do if I have a sanitary sewage backup into my home?**

A: If you experience a sanitary sewer backup, contact the Department of Public Works at (973) 857-4804. After hours response from the Department of Public Works by contacting the Verona Police Department at (973) 239-5000. We will dispatch a maintenance crew to your address to determine if the stoppage is in the Township's sanitary sewer main or your private sewer lateral. If the Township sanitary 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. The property owner is responsible for maintaining adequate flow to and through the sewer lateral from the property structure to and into the Township sanitary sewer main. If the blockage is in the Township 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 from a sanitary sewer backup?**

A: A sanitary 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 sanitary sewer lateral?**

A: All homes and businesses connected to sanitary sewer systems have a sanitary sewer lateral. The pipe transports water used inside your home out to the Township's sanitary sewer system in the street.

Just like roofs and driveways, maintaining a sanitary sewer lateral is the homeowner's responsibility. In Verona, homeowners own the sanitary sewer lateral from the house all the way to where it connects to the Township's sanitary sewer main in the street.

**Q: How do sanitary sewer laterals play a role in basement backups?**

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

**Q: How can I tell if my sanitary sewer lateral is cracked or leaking?**

A: If you have ever had to call a plumber to unclog your sanitary sewer lateral, you most likely have a leaky sanitary sewer 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 is 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 sanitary sewer lateral?**

A: You should have your sanitary sewer 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, watertight joints if installed properly. Plumbers started installing PVC laterals in Verona 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 is not raining and you get water backing up into your basement through the floor drain, there is a good chance you have a clogged sanitary sewer lateral. The water that you used inside your home cannot get through the lateral and empty into the Township's sanitary sewer main out in the street.

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

**Q: What is the fix if my sanitary sewer lateral needs repairs?**

A: Many newer repair techniques 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.