

# **A Guide to Sewer Backups**



**Town of Dover**  
**Department of Public Works**  
**211 N. Sussex Street**  
**Dover, NJ 07801**  
**973-366-2200 x3129**

## General Information

A sewer backup creates a stressful and emotional situation for the homeowner/business owner. 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 Town of Dover Public Works Department (DPW) 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 Town of Dover 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 every 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 Town of Dover urges you to check with your homeowner's insurance regarding the availability of sewer backup insurance.

The Town of Dover 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 Town should contact the Administrator's office at 973-366-2200 x1112 and request a Tort Claim.

## Contact Information

If you experience a sewer problem, please call the **Department of Public Works at 973-366-2200 x3129** from Monday through Friday, 7:00am to 3:30pm, and state that you are reporting a sewer emergency. If it is after hours or a weekend, contact the **Dover Police Department at 973-366-0302**. 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/business will be responsible for correcting the problem. The owner of the property is responsible for maintaining and cleaning the sewer lateral from the home/building to the Town'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 the lateral with the use of special locating equipment.

## **Lateral vs. Main**

A sewer lateral or house lateral is the pipeline between the Town sanitary sewer main, (usually located in the street) and the home/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 towels, disposable diapers, disposable wipes, paper products (other than toilet paper), keys, and children's toys. 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 Town of Dover Main**

The property owner can do many things to prevent a lateral from backing up. The very same things a property owner can do to prevent a backup in their home/building, can also help to prevent backups in the Town's main as well. When everyone is careful about how they dispose of certain products, the entire system is more sufficient, it causes fewer backups, saves money, and prevents stress.

### **Ways to Prevent Backups:**

- **Properly dispose of grease.** Cooking oil should be poured into a heat-resistant container and disposed of properly after it cools off, not in the drain. Washing grease down the drain with hot water is unsatisfactory. As the grease cools off, it will solidify either in the drain, the property owner's line, or in the main sewer causing the line to constrict and eventually clog.
- **Properly dispose of paper products.** Paper towels, disposable diapers, disposable wipes and feminine products do not deteriorate quickly and can cause a great deal of trouble in the property owner's lateral as well as in the town'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.
- **Periodically cut tree 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, 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. If you have continuing problems with tree roots in your lateral, you may have to regularly have the roots cut them periodically by a professional or replace your line and tap with a new plastic pipe.
- **Replace your line with new plastic pipe.** Plastic pipe will prevent tree roots from entering your line. Replace your line and tap with new plastic pipe.
- **Correct illegal plumbing connections.** Do not connect French drains, sump pumps and other flood control systems to your sanitary sewer. It is illegal to do so, and debris and silt will clog your line. Consult a plumber to correct any pre-existing illegal connections.
- **Install a backwater prevention valve.** A backwater valve can prevent or greatly reduce the possibility of a sewer backup. A backwater prevention valve is a fixture installed into a sewer

line (and sometimes into a drain line) in the basement of your home/business to prevent sewer backflows. A properly installed and maintained backwater valve allows sewage to go out, but not to come back in. A qualified plumber can assist you in determining your needs.

*If you experience a sewer blockage Monday through Friday between 7:00am to 3:30pm, call the Department of Public Works at 973-366-2200 x3129, after business hours and weekends, please call the Dover Police Department at 973-366-0302.*

### **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 Town'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. If you need assistance or answers to questions regarding sewer laterals, please contact the Department of Public Works at 973-366-2200 x3129.

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

A: Please contact the Department of Public Works at 973-366-2200 x3129.

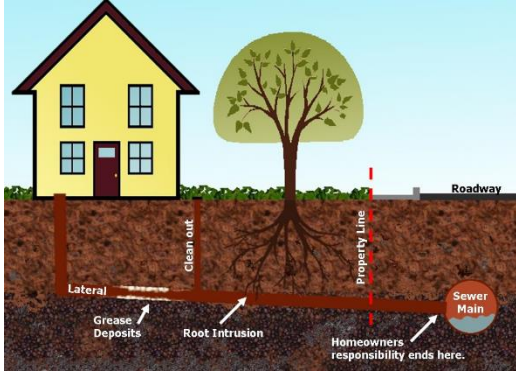
**Q: What should I do if my sewer backs up?**

A: If you experience a sewer backup, all the Department of Public Works at 973-366-2200 x3129. We will dispatch a maintenance crew to your address to determine if the stoppage is the Town's main or your sewer lateral. If the Town's 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 Town's sewer main. If the blockage is in the Town's 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 affect 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/businesses connected to sanitary sewer systems have a lateral. It's the pipe that transports water used inside your home/business out to the Town's sanitary sewer system in the street. Just like roofs and driveways, maintaining a lateral is the homeowner's/business owner's responsibility.

### Q: How do laterals play a role in basement backups?

A: Laterals are only supposed to carry water you use in your home/business out to the Town's sanitary sewer pipe. Cracks and leaks in laterals end up allowing too much excess ground water into Town owned pipes, which can overwhelm the overall sewer system and cause stormwater and wastewater to back up 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 items that are flushed or poured down the drains in your home/business, 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/business that cannot get out the lateral to the Town'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/business. 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.

Older laterals may be made out of clay pipes that were typically installed in 2 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 is a good chance you have a clogged lateral. The water that you used inside your home/business cannot get through the lateral and empty into the Town'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/business on the block. Contact the Department of Public Works at 973-366-2200 x3129 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 repaid?**

**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/business.



**THEY'RE NOT FLUSHABLE!!!** Items including wet wipes, paper towels, rags, sanitary products, nappies and diapers, and personal items such as cotton buds can block sewer pipes, and lead to sewer spills. Sewer spills can mean raw sewage entering waterways, streets or even people's homes. Flushing these items down the toilet can cause costly damage to your plumbing, the Township's sewer infrastructure and our wastewater treatment plant. They can also release microfibers and microplastics into the environment. Help us maintain our shared infrastructure by trashing non-flushable items, and only flushing the 3 P's;

**THE THREE P's – PEE, POO, PAPER (Toilet Paper)**



**FLUSHED WIPES**

Flushing wet wipes down the toilet can clog plumbing systems, leading to expensive repairs. Many people don't know that wipes shouldn't go in the toilet and pose a risk for sewer infrastructure.



**CLOGGED SEWER LINES**

Wipes make their way into private sewer laterals, septic systems, and sewer lines and can cause extensive harm and result in overflows and property damage.



**SEWER OVERFLOWS**

Once wipes make it to the sewer collection system, they can catch on roots that infiltrate pipes, weave together to form large rags and attract fats, oils and grease. This can result in blockages and sewer spills.



**ENVIRONMENTAL HARM**

Even when wipes filter out of the wastewater stream, small microfibers and microplastics can shed off wipes. These fibers can't be captured and can make their way into the environment.



**DISRUPTED TREATMENT PLANTS**

Oftentimes, masses of wipes manage to make it through the collection system and end up at wastewater treatment plants, which can result in significant damage to treatment infrastructure and recurrent disruption of the treatment process.



**DAMAGED COLLECTION SYSTEMS**

Most collection systems rely on pumps to move wastewater to treatment facilities. Wipes can clog these pumps, resulting in spills, system failures, increased maintenance requirements and damage to expensive equipment.