Sewer backups are common but unfortunate problems that occur across the country including in Kansas City. Although Water Services makes every effort to prevent such incidents, backups can still occur. In the event you experience a sewer backup that you believe is coming from the City’s main sewer line, please call 816-513-1313 or 311 immediately for assistance. The following information is provided to help answer possible questions and provide you with the steps to take if such a problem occurs on your property.

Q. What Causes A Sewer Backup?

A. Clogs or blockages in a sewer line can be caused by materials settling in the pipe, and in turn partially or completely block the sewer pipe. Such blockages can occur either in the City’s main sewer line or in the private sewer service line, which the property owner owns and maintains. The private line, also known as the lateral line, connects your home or building to the public sewer system. Wastewater from your sinks, showers, toilets, dishwashers, and washing machines flows through the lateral line to the public sewer system. Lateral lines can be blocked or obstructed by items flushed down the toilet or washed down the drain, as well as tree roots, grease, and other obstructions.

Other causes of sewer backups may include pipe breaks or cracks due to tree roots, system deterioration, or construction mishaps. When it comes to tree roots, help us help you by making sure not to plant new trees or shrubs over or near your home’s sewer. Also, keep your gutters clean to prevent leaves and twigs from going through downspouts and into your building’s sewer. Downspouts are sometimes tied directly into building sewer pipes, especially in older neighborhoods. Rain water drains directly from roofs into the sanitary sewer system through these connectors. These downspout connections often allow water from rain storms to exceed the capacity of the sewer pipes. Sanitary sewer systems are not designed for excess flow. Customers in older neighborhoods with downspouts connected to their home’s sewer system should check to see whether disconnecting their downspouts can help solve the problem. Contact Water Services at 816-513-4810 if this is a concern.

Q. How Can I Tell If My Private Sewer Line Is Blocked Or Damaged?

A. Some signs include slow draining, water pooling around basement floor drains, sewage smells inside or outside the building, wastewater leaking from cleanouts (commonly located in the basement, crawl space or yard), and wet ground in your yard.

Q: What Is My Responsibility As a Homeowner?

A: Homeowners own the private sewer line from the house to the City’s main sewer line and are responsible for its maintenance.
Q. What Should I Do If There Is A Backup?

A: Contact a private sewer drain cleaning company to clear any internal drain lines and to clear the private sewer line from your home to the connection on the city main line. The private main line must be cleared with a three-inch double blade. Once the private sewer line is cleared to the City’s main sewer line and all roots, grease, and debris have been removed, then the private line should drain as normal. This should be done BEFORE contacting Water Services to investigate the issue.

Homeowners own the private sewer line from the house to the City’s main sewer line. As such, they are responsible for maintenance and repair of this private sewer line.

If the plumber determines the private sewer service line is broken or collapsed on the City’s right-of-way or easement, the plumbing company must contact Water Services’ Wastewater Maintenance Investigation and Inspection Division at 816-513-4810 right away to schedule an appointment with a Water Services’ Inspector to verify the location of the private sewer line problem.

It is important to keep the plumber’s receipt that details what work the plumber did. The receipt must indicate the use of a three-inch double blade and have an accurate distance measured from the home’s private line to the sanitary sewer main line. The property owner must have a receipt from the plumbing company that is less than 10 days old when presenting it to the Water Services’ Inspector. **All costs involved in locating the problem shall be the responsibility of the property owner.**

Q. What Will The Water Services’ Inspector Do?

A. If the private line was inspected with a plumber’s push camera, the Water Services’ Inspector must still confirm where the problem is located out in the right-of-way or easement. The Water Services’ Inspector will assist your plumber free of charge, by placing an electronic transmitter on the end of your plumber’s cable to accurately pinpoint if the broken or collapsed pipe is located on the City’s right-of-way or easement.
Q. Who Will Make The Repair?

A. Homeowners own the private sewer line from the house to the City’s main sewer line. As such, they are responsible for maintenance and repair of the lateral sewer. If the defect is found to be on the outside of the right-of-way or easement, the property owner must make repairs. If the defect is located on the City’s right-of-way or easement, Water Services will repair the private sewer service line in accordance with City ordinances, provided repair work does not interfere with regular sewer maintenance duties. If the property owner or occupant considers the repair to be an emergency, or is otherwise unwilling to accept the City’s tentative schedule, the property owner/occupant should hire a plumber for the repair and is responsible for all costs.

Q. Who Will Pay For Water-Related Damage On My Property?

A. All water-related damages to the basement as a result of a broken private line on private property or on the City right-of-way are the responsibility of the property owner. The property owner is also responsible for the regulation of their water usage to minimize damage. If the City main is found to be defective, which is shown to result in water damages to the property owner’s basement, a claim may be filed by calling the City’s Law Department at 816-513-3126.

Q. Will My Insurance Cover Any Damage To My Home Or Property?

A. In the majority of cases, a special rider is needed on your homeowner’s or renter’s insurance policy to cover damages related to sewer backups or water damage. Check with your insurance agent for policy provision. The City recently partnered with Service Line Warranties of America to offer customers a sewer line warranty. For more information on this offer, call 866-922-9006 or visit www.slwofa.com.

Q. What Does Water Services Do To Prevent Sewer Backups?

A. Water Services makes every attempt to prevent sewer backups in the public wastewater system before they occur. Sewer lines are designed to prevent accumulation and blockages. Maintenance crews inspect and clean miles of wastewater lines throughout the city on a regular schedule. De-greasing chemicals are sometimes injected into the lines in areas that are prone to stoppages, such as those near restaurants, apartments, or high-density housing developments. Most backups are confined to the sewer pipeline and do not back up into a home.

Q. What Causes Sewer Odors And How Can They Be Prevented?

A. Sewer odor or gas is always present in the sewer system and cannot be eliminated. This is why there are provisions in the uniform plumbing code to insure that vent pipes and traps are installed in buildings and the home plumbing systems to carry odor out through the roof vent or to prevent it from coming back into the house. The most common causes of sewer gas odor entering houses are as follows:
1. Caps on the floor traps and cleanouts are not properly installed.
2. Washing machines drain to vent pipes without traps.
3. Cleanout plugs are removed from the inside of floor drains.
4. Seldom-used floor drains do not have water in the traps.

Visually check and correct these conditions and pour water into unused drains. If odor problems continue, have your plumber completely check the sewer system to make sure there are no air leaks. If the plumber has checked the complete sewer system and no air leaks are found, call Water Services’ Line Maintenance Division at 816-513-4810 for further assistance and investigative work.

Atmospheric conditions can have an effect on when you may get odor inside the house. When Barometric pressure is low or falling, the air outside is heavier than air in the sewer system and any openings in the sewer system will discharge sewer gas or odors.

**Q: What Is Safe To Flush Down The Drain?**

**A:** The only items you should ever flush down a toilet is human waste and toilet paper. Never use a toilet as a trash can. Flushing the wrong items can damage the sewer system, cause sewer backups in your home, and cause sewer overflows which damage the environment. Do NOT flush the following items: automotive fluids, bandages and bandage wrappings, chewing gum, cigarette butts, cleaning wipes of any kind, condoms, cotton balls and swabs, dental floss, disposable diapers, facial tissue, grease, paint, solvents, sealants and thinners, poisons & hazardous waste, sanitary napkins, tampons and tampon applicators, and unused medications.