

ENVIRONMENTAL HOME

Restoring a healthy home after a sewage backup

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FOR TRIB TOTAL MEDIA

Let's start this subject with a collective "yuck!" There are not many events in home ownership that are more disgusting than a sewer backup. That holds true whether it is a septic system backup or a municipal sanitary sewer backup. It is nasty.

Sewage backups rank as one of the top causes of mold contamination of homes, not to mention the other illnesses that backups can harbor. If you think about it, sewage is both food and water for mold.

Sewage backups and drain overflows contain contaminants that can cause serious illness or disease. Disease-causing agents in raw sewage include bacteria, parasites and viruses that cause serious illnesses including Hepatitis A, tetanus and others.

The best advice is to have a professional with proper training and equipment clean up any sewage problem. In many cases, the sewage problem is covered by a homeowner's insurance policy. Whether you make the choice to have a professional do a cleanup or not, it is better to know the correct way to handle the sewage. I have wanted to write an accurate article about the subject for years but needed to see a cleanup first-hand. I thank Un-Flood-It, of Tarentum, for allowing me to accompany them on a proper professional sewage cleanup.

The cleanup process explained

Stop the water that is causing the backup. Don't flush the toilet or run water in the sink. Stop the washing machine and anything else adding to the problem.

Keep people with compromised immune systems or without proper protection from entering the contaminated room. Never allow anyone with open skin injuries near sewage.

Take as many pictures of the backup and damage as you can. Document the extent and depth of the sewage. Also, photograph



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A member of the Un-Flood-It staff works through the steam cleaning process.

all contents. Photos can help identify the contents which are lost if you are covered by insurance. If the problem was created by a utility, they might require proof of the extent of your loss. Pictures are never a mistake.

Call your insurance agent. You have a duty as an insured to minimize the damage from any covered loss, and any help or advice from them to minimize the damage can help you.

If you know professionals that you trust and know they will do a good job, have that company respond to the problem. Unfortunately, the "preferred remediation vendor" suggested by an adjuster might not be the best choice for you or your home.

Homeowners can select a company they trust. Claims are paid using standardized software that accounts for the actual work required item by item. This program is like the one used for repairs to cars after an accident.

Do not touch contaminated materials without personal protection such as gloves, protective

clothing, glasses and masks.

Have the standing sewage water pumped or removed from the area. Sump pumps that can pump down to 1/8 inch of standing water can be used to accomplish this. The sooner the water is gone, the less water is absorbed by the building and contents.

Turn off any electrical system or appliance. Any time water and electricity mix can be a disaster.

Make sure that any ductwork or other pathway that could spread the odor and contamination are closed off. Open any windows, and vent the area.

Seal the contaminated areas of a building. Close doors and hang plastic sheets in openings.

Install professional-grade exhaust fans (negative air equipment) to drive the odor and any airborne particles out of the building.

Do not place fans to dry the contaminated area prior to cleaning the surfaces. Never sweep or disturb dried sewage. That puts it into the air, where it can spread and be inhaled.

Remove items that can't be salvaged from the building. That would include wet drywall, paneling, most carpeting and pad, upholstered furniture, curtains, wet books and similar items. Bag the items before carrying them to reduce additional area or personal contamination.

Remove and dispose of items that cost more to clean than to replace.

Stage the items that can be cleaned and salvaged in a place where they can be cleaned. It is best to not move those items to uncontaminated building areas because that creates more areas that will need decontaminated.

The best place would be the outdoors if the weather allows or a separate block garage or other facility.

In the case where I was with Un-Flood-It, those options were not practical because it was a rainy day. Their innovative solution was a large box truck in the driveway to stage the items that could be safely cleaned.

Physical removal of the waste

sewage on contents is an essential part of the cleaning process before disinfection. After wiping, Un-Flood-It used a plant-based disinfectant and anti-mold product to disinfect contents. My testing surfaces with ATP methods proved that the product is effective.

Open any wall cavities that are wet. Remove the distance up from the floor that the materials have gotten wet including baseboard, wall materials and insulation.

Once windows and doors can be closed, dry the area using dehumidifiers. This is not effective while the area is being vented with open windows and doors, and you might need to wait until the initial removal and waste removal is complete.

The best cleanup procedure is low pressure steaming of floors, walls and other contaminated surfaces followed by a disinfectant spray. It cleans the surfaces of the waste in addition to disinfection. This should be a slow and methodical process. Clean inch by inch, square foot by square foot for the best results.

The bottom line is your health and the value of your home are dependent upon proper cleanup after a sewage backup of any type. As an environmental inspector, I have found that a "do-it-yourself" cleanup can be the source of mold, odor and health problems years after the backup occurred. An improper cleanup can also make resale of a home more difficult. A professional cleanup is the best solution to a sewage backup.

For more information about Healthy Infusion Professionals, go to EnviroSpect.com/sewagecleanup.

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