

Sewer Cleaning and “Blow Backs”

Summer 2015

The Franklin County Sanitary Engineer must clean its sewer system regularly to ensure it functions properly to protect public health and the environment. This work is performed both by County staff and also by hired vendors. Cleaning sewers is performed with a high pressure water stream through a hose using various nozzles appropriate for the type of sewer pipe cleaning (roots, grease, etc.). The debris washed from the pipe is collected at the next manhole through a suction hose. The equipment used is called a Vactor (vac) truck and you may have seen them before or within your community.

During the cleaning process, sewer lines can develop air pressure or a partial vacuum from the cleaning process. Usually any excess air pressure or vacuum will dissipate through the plumbing vents, but occasionally there are facilities with inadequate plumbing vents (i.e. no vents, undersized vents or obstructed vents). In the case of inadequate venting, air pressure could escape through the toilet, floor, sink, tub or shower drains, causing water to splash out or, a vacuum could draw the water out of the fixture traps causing an unpleasant odor. This is called a “blow back.”

What can I do to prevent “blow-back” into my home when cleaning is being performed in nearby sewers?

The County or its contracted vendor will notify residents and businesses prior to performing sewer line maintenance in the area by leaving a notice with the dates and times of said maintenance. To minimize the chance of “blow back” cover all floor drains with plastic and place a weight on the plastic, cover all toilets with plastic and close the lid on the plastic, and for odor, run water into each drain to refill the traps.

The actual cleaning process from manhole to manhole does not take too long although you may see equipment in the area for longer periods due to equipment set up and tear down. The cleaning that could affect your home should not be longer than a few hours.

What to do if you experience a “blow-back”?

As an important first step, please immediately contact the County at 614-525-3940. This will initiate an investigation that will involve a County staff visiting your home to confirm if cleaning was the cause. It will also help to minimize the possibility of a repeat event.

Typically, recovery from a ‘blow back’ event is simply a matter of removing any debris and the cleaning of toilets, sinks, baths, showers, that may have been impacted. You may then continue normal use.

Do I need to worry about my health?

Sewage “blow-back” events that involve only the discharge of water to walls or surfaces do not result in an immediate health risk. However, it is important that any sewage contaminated water, any resulting debris and surfaces that have come in contact with this water be promptly and thoroughly cleaned. This will require the removal of any debris, the cleaning of surfaces with a soap solution and the disinfection of hard surfaces with a diluted household bleach/water solution. Regular household cleaning products are

all that is needed. Rubber gloves are recommended. Never mix ammonia and chlorine products such as household bleach.

What can I do to minimize the need for frequent sewer cleaning?

Keep grease out of the sewers. Do not put cooking grease or oil down the sink or into the toilet. Scrape the grease and oil, once cooled, into the trash. Also do not put rags, diapers, wet wipes, trash, feminine products or contraceptives into the toilet. These should also be placed in the trash. All of these items cause blockages in the sewers that can result in backups into homes or sanitary sewer overflows to the ground or waters, which is bad for public health and the environment.

The Franklin County Sanitary Engineer is currently performing an intensive Sanitary Sewer Evaluation Study (SSES) which is expected to last through mid-2017. The SSES work does include field activities such as sewer cleaning, televising, smoke testing and dye testing. This work will involve crews opening and inserting equipment into the sewer system for testing and evaluation. Notices of the SSES work will be provided in areas as it will be performed. A map of activity can be found here: <http://arcg.is/1erBBzp>.

Due to the increased cleaning activity as part of the SSES, the Sanitary Engineer wants to make customers aware of the “blow back” scenario in order to minimize the problems and inconvenience they cause.