Sewage overflows at home

Summary

Sewage overflows can occur at home as a result of damaged or blocked plumbing, backflow from the sewerage system, a damaged septic tank or as a result of flood water containing sewage. Sewage contains harmful microorganisms such as bacteria, viruses and protozoa. Direct contact with sewage or surfaces contaminated by sewage can result in illnesses such as gastroenteritis.

If your home is affected by a sewage overflow, it is important to take measures to protect yourself and your family by avoiding direct contact with the sewage and any contaminated surfaces. Thoroughly wash and disinfect every surface that has come into contact with sewage.

Make sure you wear appropriate protective clothing such as rubber gloves, boots and eye protection. Use an uncontaminated water supply for the clean-up process. Do not use your water supply if you are unsure of its safety.

Public health advice for sewage overflows

The Victorian Department of Health and Human Services provides advice to residents who have experienced sewage overflows at home. This includes:

- practicing good hygiene such as hand washing with soap and warm water, especially after touching contaminated surfaces and before preparing food
- cleaning and disinfecting all contaminated areas
- keeping children and pets away from contaminated areas until they have been cleaned and disinfected
- not allowing children to play with contaminated toys until they have been disinfected
- contacting a plumber if you suspect your plumbing or septic tank system has been physically damaged
- cleaning out silt and debris from septic tanks inundated with flood water. This should be pumped out by a professional as soon as possible, after flood water has subsided and it is considered safe for the vehicle to access the septic tank. Refer to your local business directory to arrange a septic tank pumping service by a licensed contractor
- contacting your local water business or local council if sewage is leaking outside your property boundary. Call your local water business to have the problem assessed. Depending on the location of the problem, this could be the responsibility of the water business or the householder
- using bottled or boiled water for non-drinking uses, such as washing dishes and brushing your teeth, if your private water supply has been contaminated
- always seeking medical advice if you become ill or injured.

Clean-up procedures for sewage overflows

Advice on the correct clean-up procedures after a sewage overflow includes:

- making sure electrical hazards are managed before you start cleaning up. This may involve switching off the power at the house switchboard or fuse box, or calling a licensed electrician
- wearing protective clothing such as rubber gloves, boots and eye protection
- sweeping out water. Remove and discard contaminated household materials that cannot be effectively cleaned or disinfected, such as carpet, mattresses, upholstered furniture and children’s soft toys
- removing and discarding drywall/plasterboard and insulation that has been contaminated with sewage or flood water. Consult a building practitioner if you are unsure of how to do this or are concerned about the structural

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integrity of your home
• cleaning and disinfecting all contaminated areas with cold water and detergent, then disinfecting using chlorine solution. Paying special attention to cooking utensils, work surfaces and other surfaces such as floors and walls
• soaking utensils in a solution of one cup of household chlorine bleach in 10 litres of water (a household bucket, using cold water) for two minutes. Rinse in clean cold water
• disinfecting hard surfaces using the same solution and leave wet for 10 minutes. Rinse off with clean cold water
• disinfecting cleaning mops, brooms and brushes with the bleach solution
• cleaning and drying dirty footwear, and washing your clothes in hot water and soap separately from uncontaminated items
• having adequate ventilation inside the house to help the drying process by using fans, air conditioning units and dehumidifiers
• throwing out all food and food containers that have been in contact with sewage. Tinned food and bottles may still be used provided they are not damaged and are completely sealed and disinfected before use. If you are not sure whether an item is safe, throw it out.
• attending to any cuts and wounds immediately. Disinfect the wound then cover with a waterproof dressing. Keep open wounds as clean as possible by washing well with soap and clean water.
• washing your hands and children’s hands frequently and any affected parts of your body with soap and water.
• Remembering that mould or mildew may develop if items are not completely dried. The Department of Health and Human Services provides information and advice on how to clean mould.
• using chlorine solution to clean hard surfaces if the outside of your home has been affected. Make sure you wear protective clothing and protective eyewear. Wash your hands with soap and warm water after completing the clean-up, and wash your footwear and clothing as described above. Make sure that children and pets are kept out of the affected area until clean-up has been completed.

More detailed advice on managing sewage overflows in homes impacted by flooding, including specific advice on how to disinfect water, preventing illness from food and contaminated surfaces, is provided by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Where to get help
• Local water business
• Council Environmental Health Officer
• Department of Health and Human Services, Water Program Tel. 1300 761 874
• State Emergency Services Victoria Tel. 132 500 for emergency help in floods
• Your doctor

Things to remember
• Sewage contains harmful bacteria, viruses and protozoa.
• Wear protective clothing such as gloves, appropriate footwear and protective eyewear when cleaning.
• Do not use your water supply for drinking, washing dishes, brushing your teeth, hand-washing or preparing food until you know it safe.