

FAQ

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Sanitary Sewer Utility

The City has compiled this list of common questions. If you have additional questions or concerns, please refer to the contact information at the top of this page.

What do I do if my sanitary sewer is backing up?

1. Immediately stop all water use. Sewer backups are typically caused by a blockage either in the plumbing within your home or business or in the sewer lateral between the building and the street. Turn off washing machines, dishwashers, showers and anything that uses water.
2. It is recommended that you contact a local plumbing contractor.
You may choose to contact Environmental Utilities during business hours – Monday through Sunday between 8 am – 4 pm – however please note that service fees may be applied to your utility account for Environmental Utilities staff to attend.

Why is the City charging for the sewer cleaning service now?

- With the current economic times the City can no longer sustain a business plan that offers these types of services without a charge.
- The City believes that City departments should not compete with local businesses; this initiative should give more business back to the local plumbing companies.

Will the City offer all of the same sewer maintenance services?

- For a fee, the City will offer **Tree Root & Blockage Removal; Tree Root Foaming** and **CCTV Camera services**. If warranted, Sewer Service Flushing will also be offered at an hourly fee.

How much will it cost for City staff to attend for a sewer backup or camera inspection?

- Please contact Environmental Utilities at 403.529.8176 to inquire about and discuss the new fee schedule.

How will the fees be charged?

- The fees will be charged through a service order request on the utility account for the affected address.

Will City Staff still attend for routine maintenances?

- Routine sewer maintenances will no longer be offered by Environmental Utilities. It is recommended that you contact a local plumber or rent a machine yourself.

What if a plumber says the blockage is on City side?

- Contact Environmental Utilities during business hours. A crew will be dispatched to your residence to clear the blockage and determine where the problem has occurred. Please note, fees may apply.

Will the new services be offered after hours?

- Environmental Utilities staff will attend to complete these services during regular business hours – Monday through Sunday between the hours of 8 am – 4 pm.

What if I experience a sewer backup overnight?

- It is recommend that you call a local plumber to attend after business hours.

What will the City crew do to stop the sewer backup?

- The crew will check to see whether the sanitary sewer main located in the street is flowing properly. If there is a blockage in the main, a crew will be dispatched to remove the blockage in the sanitary sewer main.
- If the sewer main is flowing properly, the crew will clear the blockage in the service line by using a machine that goes through a 4-6 inch cleanout access.
- If the sewer backup occurs after-hours, a callout operator will only check that the sewer main is flowing and will not attend inside the home or business.

What should I do if I smell sewer odour but don't see sewer backup?

- When sewer gasses are present inside the home, it is usually due to one or more P-traps becoming dried out. The water in a P-trap will evaporate if the fixture is not used for an extended period. Seldom used bathrooms or utility sinks are commonly the source of sewer odors.
- The simple solution to this problem is to periodically run a small amount of water (one or two cups) into the drain refilling the trap.

What is the purpose of a P-Trap?

- Every water fixture in your house has a P-trap. This "U" shaped pipe is clearly visible under sinks, and is present in some form on all lines draining to the sewage system. The "U" shape holds water, creating a seal and preventing gases from backing up from the sewer into the house through the drain.

What is my responsibility as a home or business owner?

- It is the home or business owner's responsibility to maintain the sewer lateral from the home or business to the property line. The city is responsible for maintaining the sewer lateral from the sewer main to property line as well as the sanitary sewer mains themselves.

What do I do if I think City trees are the reason for sewer backup?

- Depending on where the root infiltration is located, it is the home or business owner's responsibility to maintain the sewer lateral on private property. Some drain cleaners or plumbers can auger the roots out of the sewer line. Also, root herbicide can be purchased at a hardware store and administered to remove the roots from within the sewer line while not harming the tree. Sewer Utility staff is responsible for the sewer lateral and sanitary sewer main on public property.
- If you have an inquiry about the tree itself, contact the Parks and Recreation Department at 403.529.8333.

What can I do to prevent roots from entering my sewer service line?

- Maintenance (foaming/Root Cutting) is an option but is only a very short term solution.

The only way to ensure roots do not enter your sewer service line is to either replace the line with a PVC sewer pipe which involves excavation, or by CIPP lining of the service.

CIPP stands for *Cast-in-Place-Piping*. During this process, a resin-impregnated sock is introduced into the sewer service along with a plastic bladder. This can be installed through a standard sized cleanout in the basement of the residence, therefore no digging is required. The bladder is then filled with water and heated up causing the resin to cure. The bladder is then burst to drain the water and then removed. What is left is a hard monolithic liner that is root proof.

Note that not all sewer lines will accept a liner. Lines with an excessive sag cannot be lined as they will not properly cure. For more information contact Environmental Utilities at 403.529.8176.

What causes blockages to occur?

Blockages can occur for two reasons:

1. Accumulation of material inside of the pipe. Draining improper substances through the sewer, such as kitchen fats, oils and greases (FOG), food, sand, clay or mud, can cause a build-up and blockage in otherwise properly constructed sewers. However, the proper operation of a sewer lateral requires that the line be constructed "on grade", that is with a consistent slope. High or low areas along a line will cause small amounts of greases, soap scum and other material to accumulate, eventually causing a blockage. A clean-out provides the homeowner or sewer drain contractor an access point for sewer line maintenance.
2. The presence of sand or roots entering the line through a break or other damage to the line. Tree roots will seek out sources of water, such as sewer lines, and will enter even the smallest cracks in the line. Roots will inevitably clog a sewer line. Larger cracks will not only allow roots to enter but will cause sand and dirt to enter the line, blocking the flow. As dirt flows into the line, a small "sink hole" or depression appears in the ground above the break. These sink holes almost always indicate a problem with a sanitary sewer line or a storm drain, and therefore should be investigated or reported.

Where does FOG (fats, oils and grease) come from that gets into the sanitary sewer system?

- Mostly from cooking oils and fats, condiments, meats and meat by-products that are disposed of down the kitchen drains and through the dishwasher drain.

What can I do to help reduce FOG?

- Pour fats, oils and greases into a can or empty jar, cool and discard it into the garbage instead of pouring it down the drain.
- Use garbage disposals sparingly. This will only grind by-products into smaller chunks that will still get stuck in the lines.
- Scrape plates into the garbage instead of the garbage disposal.
- Dry wipe greasy pans before washing them

What is a sewer lateral?

- A sewer lateral is a sewer pipe that connects your home or business to the sanitary sewer main in the road.

How can my sewer lateral be accessed?

- Your sewer lateral can be accessed through your clean-out. A clean-out is typically found in your basement where the lateral exits your home or business. Generally, a clean-out has a threaded cap that is 4 – 6 inches in diameter.

What is the purpose of the roof vent?

- All houses have plumbing vents that extend through the roof. These vents allow air to flow both in and out of the house plumbing system, helping water to flow through the pipes. Working in combination with the P-traps, gases from the sewer system are vented safely through the roof.

What can I flush down the toilet?

Human waste and toilet paper only!

- A number of liquids are flushed down the toilets that upset the chemistry of our wastewater treatment plant and can cause volatile conditions in our sewers. A few examples are medications, chemicals, oils, paints, paint thinners, antifreeze, batteries and gasoline. There are many materials that cause blockages like grease, diapers, cat litter, dental floss, feminine products etc. that also should not be flushed down the toilet.
- The Wastewater Treatment Plant takes pride in protecting our receiving water. We as a community need to be conscious about what we are washing down our sinks and flushing down our toilets so that we can continue to live in a safe, clean environment.

Where does the water leaving the Wastewater Treatment Plant go?

- The water discharged from the Wastewater Treatment Plant is referred to as effluent. The City of Medicine Hat's wastewater effluent is discharged into the South Saskatchewan River.

If I flush a fish down the toilet, will it make it to the river?

- Not to upset any children that hope that their pet will make it to the South Saskatchewan River, but we do have to say no. The fish will travel through many pipes, pumps and screens eventually ending up in the biosolids removed from the Wastewater Treatment Plant. The biosolids are then taken up to the Waste Management Facility and turned into compost.

What is a Sewer Backflow Preventer/Sewer Backwater valve?

- A sewer Backflow Preventer/Backwater valve is a device installed on the sewer service line at a location just before it exits the building. It is, in effect, a one way valve that will allow the sewer flow from the property out to the sewer main in the street. It is designed to prevent sewage coming back through the sewer service line if the sewer main in the street is blocked and sewage starts to back up in the sewer main located in the roadway.

Should I have a Sewer Backflow Preventer installed?

- Installation of a Sewer Backflow Preventer/Sewer Backwater Valve is up to the discretion of the homeowner. After the 2013 flood, homes that were located in the imminent flood zone were recommended to have a Sanitary Sewer Isolation valve installed; however, in the end, the decision to have a valve installed on the sewer line was and will continue to be left up to the homeowners.

Who do I call about Storm Sewer problems?

- The City's Municipal Works Department maintains the storm sewer system. Storm sewers can be identified by the storm sewer manholes on the street and the frame and grates/catch basin grates located on streets near the curb and gutter. To report a storm sewer problem please contact the Municipal Works Department at 403.529.8177.