

Is It Safe to Stay Home After a Sewage Backup? What St. Louis Homeowners Need to Know

When raw sewage backs up into your basement or main living area, your first instinct might be to grab some bleach and a mop and get to work. But a sewage spill is not the same as a burst pipe or a minor flood. The waste water that comes back up through your drains can carry bacteria, viruses, and other pathogens that pose real health risks. For homeowners in St. Louis, where aging infrastructure and heavy rains can overwhelm sewer lines, understanding what to do after a sewage backup is critical. This article walks through the immediate dangers, the cleanup process, and why professional help is often the safest choice.

The Health Risks of a Sewage Backup

Sewage is classified as a biohazard for good reason. It contains human waste, household chemicals, and a cocktail of microorganisms. Bacteria such as *E. coli*, salmonella, and campylobacter can cause severe gastrointestinal illness. Viruses like hepatitis A and norovirus can also survive in sewage. Even after the visible liquid is gone, bacteria can linger on surfaces and in the air, especially in porous materials like drywall, carpet, and wood. The sewage smell itself is not just unpleasant; it can indicate the presence of hydrogen sulfide gas, which at high levels can cause headaches, dizziness, and respiratory irritation.

For anyone with a compromised immune system, young children, elderly relatives, or pets, the risks are even higher. That is why a restoration company will never recommend simply drying out the area and moving on. In many cases, the safest approach is to leave the home until the affected area has been professionally cleaned, dried, and tested for mold and bacteria.

When You Can Stay and When You Should Leave

There is no one-size-fits-all answer. The decision depends on the size of the spill, the type of surfaces affected, and how quickly you can get professional help. For a small backup that is confined to a concrete basement floor with no porous materials involved, and if you can seal off that area from the rest of the house, staying might be acceptable. But even then, you will need to wear protective gear, run exhaust fans to vent the space to the outside, and clean with a hospital-grade disinfectant. You should also keep children and pets away from the area until it is fully dry and sanitized.

For larger backups that soak into drywall, carpet, or wooden subfloors, the situation changes. Those materials can harbor bacteria and also become a breeding ground for mold within 24 to 48 hours. Mold remediation after a sewage backup is a separate but related process, and it is much easier to prevent mold growth than to remove it later. In these scenarios, it is generally

safer to relocate temporarily, even if that means staying with family or in a hotel. The cost of a few nights away is small compared to the health consequences of exposure or the expense of tearing out and replacing contaminated building materials.

Another factor is how the backup occurred. If the problem is a blocked sewer line on your property, a plumber may be able to clear it quickly and stop the flow. But if the issue is a city sewer main that is overwhelmed, the backup may continue or recur until the municipal system recovers. In St. Louis, heavy rain events can cause widespread sewer backups, and it is not uncommon for multiple homes on the same block to be affected. In those cases, waiting it out at home may not be practical, and you will want to call a company that specializes in [sewage cleanup St. Louis](#) homeowners can trust.

What Professional Sewage Cleanup Involves

Professional sewage cleanup is a multi-step process that goes far beyond what a homeowner can do with off-the-shelf cleaners. The first step is always safety. Technicians wear full personal protective equipment, including respirators, gloves, and waterproof suits. They set up containment barriers to prevent contaminated water from spreading to clean areas. Then they remove all standing water using pumps and wet vacuums designed for biohazard waste.

After the water is gone, the real work begins. All affected porous materials are removed and disposed of properly. That means cutting out sections of drywall, pulling up carpet and padding, and often removing baseboards and insulation. Non-porous surfaces like concrete, tile, and metal are scrubbed with industrial-grade disinfectants and allowed to dry completely. The crew will also use air scrubbers and dehumidifiers to pull moisture out of the air and speed up drying. This step is critical for preventing secondary water damage and mold growth.

Once the area is dry and sanitized, the restoration phase can begin. That may involve rebuilding walls, installing new flooring, and repainting. Some restoration companies handle the entire process from cleanup through reconstruction, which can simplify things for the homeowner. Gateway Water & Mold, for example, provides both cleanup and mold remediation services for the Greater St. Louis area, which means one crew can manage the job from start to finish.

The Role of Your Insurance Claim

Many homeowners do not realize that standard homeowners insurance policies often do not cover sewage backup damage unless you have added a specific endorsement or rider. Flood damage from rising water is also typically excluded. However, some policies do cover water damage from a sudden plumbing failure inside the home. The distinction matters because it affects whether your insurance claim will be approved and how much of the cleanup cost you will have to cover out of pocket.

If you experience a sewage backup, document everything. Take photos and videos of the affected areas before you start any cleanup. Keep receipts for any supplies you buy and for professional services you hire. Contact your insurance company as soon as possible, but do not wait for an adjuster to arrive before starting the cleanup process. Most policies require you to take reasonable steps to prevent further damage, and that includes removing standing water and beginning the drying process. A professional sewage cleanup company can help you navigate these steps and provide documentation for your claim.

Preventing Future Backups

While you cannot control what happens in the municipal sewer system, you can take steps to reduce the risk of a backup on your property. One of the most effective measures is installing a backwater valve, which prevents sewage from flowing back into your home when the main sewer line is overloaded. Another is having your sewer line inspected and cleaned periodically. Hydro-jetting, a process that uses high-pressure water to clear debris and tree roots from pipes, can keep your line flowing freely. A plumber can advise you on whether your home would benefit from these services.

If you have a septic tank, regular pumping and maintenance are essential. A neglected septic system can overflow into your yard or back up into your house, creating the same kind of biohazard as a city sewer backup. And if you do experience a sewage spill, act quickly. The longer sewage sits, the deeper it penetrates into materials and the more likely mold becomes. That is why having a trusted restoration company on call can make a real difference. When you search for sewage cleanup St. Louis options, look for a company that is licensed, insured, and experienced in biohazard remediation.

Final Thoughts

Deciding whether to stay home after a sewage backup is not just a matter of convenience; it is a health and safety decision. For small, contained spills on non-porous surfaces, staying may be possible with proper protective measures and thorough cleaning. For larger backups that involve porous materials or that affect multiple rooms, it is usually safer to leave the home and let professionals handle the cleanup. The cost of professional sewage cleanup St. Louis services is an investment in your family's health and your home's long-term condition. And if you are dealing with the aftermath of a backup, remember that you are not alone. Many St. Louis homeowners have faced this situation, and with the right help, your home can be restored to a safe, clean state.