

Why Gateway Water & Mold Urges Caution After a Sewage Backup

When a sewage backup hits your home, the mess is the least of your worries. Raw waste can seep into drywall, soak into carpet padding, and spread pathogens through the air. I have walked into basements in Greater St. Louis where the smell alone told me the problem went far deeper than what the homeowner could see. The immediate instinct is to start cleaning, but that can make things worse. The smarter move is to step back, call a professional, and understand what you are dealing with.

Gateway Water & Mold deals with these situations every day. Their crews respond to sewage cleanup calls across the region, often within an hour. The question they hear most from homeowners is straightforward: is it safe to stay in the house after a sewage backup? The short answer is that it depends on the extent of the spill, how quickly you act, and whether you can isolate the affected area. But in many cases, the safest call is to leave until the cleanup is done. [Gateway Water & Mold](#)

What a Sewage Backup Actually Releases Into Your Home

Sewage is classified as black water, meaning it contains human waste and the bacteria, viruses, and parasites that come with it. Grey water, which comes from sinks and showers, is less hazardous but still carries risks if it mixes with black water. When a sewer line backs up, you get a combination of both, plus whatever chemicals and debris were flushed down the drains in your neighborhood.

The St. Louis Metropolitan Sewer District manages a vast network of pipes, some of which are over a century old. Heavy rain, blockages, and system failures can cause backups that send this mixture into basements and even into finished living spaces. Once the water recedes, the contamination remains on every surface it touched. That includes porous materials like wood, drywall, and insulation, which may need to be removed entirely.

The health risks are real. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has documented cases where exposure to raw sewage led to gastrointestinal illness, skin infections, and respiratory problems. Children, elderly people, and anyone with a compromised immune system face the highest danger. If you have pets, they are also vulnerable because they walk through contaminated areas and then groom themselves.

Why Ventilation Alone Is Not Enough

Opening windows and running fans feels like the right thing to do. It helps with the smell, but it does not eliminate the pathogens trapped in your home. Sewage backup creates an environment where bacteria and mold spores can thrive, especially in hidden spaces like wall cavities and under flooring. Indoor air quality can degrade quickly, and the particles that become airborne can settle in your HVAC system, spreading contamination throughout the house.

I have seen cases where homeowners thought they had dried everything out, only to discover mold growth behind baseboards a week later. Mold remediation is a separate process from sewage cleanup, and it often requires removing affected materials and treating the area with professional-grade antimicrobial agents. The Environmental Protection Agency recommends that any porous material that has been in contact with sewage be discarded, not cleaned. That means carpet, drywall, and insulation usually have to go.

What Professional Sewage Cleanup Looks Like

When a crew from a restoration company arrives, their first step is to assess the extent of the contamination. They will identify the source of the backup and determine whether it involves black water, grey water, or both. Then they set up containment barriers to prevent contaminated particles from moving into clean areas of the house.

Next, they extract standing water using a pump truck and industrial vacuums. In some cases, hydro excavation is used to flush out debris that has settled into cracks and crevices. Drying equipment, including air movers and dehumidifiers, is brought in to pull moisture out of the structure. All contaminated materials are removed and disposed of according to local regulations. The affected area is then cleaned and sanitized with EPA-registered disinfectants.

This process is not something a homeowner can replicate with store-bought cleaners. The equipment is specialized, and the protocols are designed to reduce the risk of cross-contamination. A 24/7 service like Gateway Water & Mold can have a crew onsite within a few hours of a call, which limits how far the contamination spreads and reduces the chance of secondary damage like mold growth.

Staying or Leaving: What to Consider

If the backup is confined to a basement that is completely separate from the living area and has its own ventilation, it may be possible to stay in the rest of the house while the cleanup is happening. But even then, there are trade-offs. The drying equipment is loud, the chemicals used for disinfection can be irritating, and the work itself can stir up dust and particles. For many families, the disruption is enough that they prefer to stay elsewhere for a day or two.

If the backup has affected the main floor or has soaked through to the floor above, the risks increase significantly. Pathogens can travel through shared air spaces, and the process of removing wet drywall can release mold spores into the air. In these situations, the prudent decision is to find alternative lodging until the restoration is complete.

Insurance often covers the cost of temporary housing if the home is uninhabitable. It is worth checking with your provider as soon as possible. Document the damage with photos and keep receipts for any expenses related to the cleanup. Restoration companies can help you navigate the claims process because they work with insurers regularly.

Preventing Future Sewage Backups

Not every backup can be prevented, but there are steps that reduce the risk. Here are a few practical measures:

- Have a plumber inspect your sewer line with a camera every few years to catch tree root intrusion or pipe cracks early.
- Install a backwater valve that prevents sewage from flowing into your home during a municipal system overload.
- Avoid flushing anything besides toilet paper and human waste. Wipes, even those labeled as flushable, are a common cause of blockages.
- Keep your downspouts and yard drains clear so that stormwater does not overwhelm the sewer system.
- If you have a basement bathroom or laundry room, consider a sump pump system that can handle overflow before it becomes a backup.

These measures cost money upfront, but they are far cheaper than a full sewage cleanup and mold remediation. A Plumbing Emergency can happen at any time, and being prepared makes a real difference in how much damage occurs.

What to Do Right Now If You Have a Backup

If you are reading this because you have a sewage backup in your home right now, here is the immediate plan:

- Turn off your HVAC system to stop circulating contaminated air.
- Keep children and pets away from the affected area.
- Avoid walking through the water. Wear boots and gloves if you must enter the space.
- Call a professional sewage cleanup service. Do not try to clean it yourself.
- Contact your insurance company and let them know what happened.

Restoration companies in Greater St. Louis have seen every kind of basement flooding and sewer backup. They know the local infrastructure, the common failure points, and the fastest ways to get your home back to a safe condition. Gateway Water & Mold, for example, offers 24/7 service and can guide you through the entire process from assessment to final inspection.

The Restoration Industry has developed solid standards for handling biological contamination. Trusting a trained crew is not just about convenience; it is about protecting your health and preventing long-term damage to your home. Mold spores can start colonizing within 24 to 48 hours in a damp environment, so speed matters. The faster the drying and disinfection begin, the less likely you are to face a secondary mold problem.

The Bottom Line

A sewage backup is not just a plumbing problem. It is a health hazard that requires professional handling. The decision to stay or leave depends on the specifics of the situation, but the safest default is to leave until the affected area has been properly cleaned and dried. Companies like Gateway Water & Mold have the equipment, training, and experience to do that work safely and thoroughly. If you are ever in doubt, err on the side of caution. Your home can be restored, but your health is harder to repair.