



Department of Health

**Food Safety  
Program**

**Bureau of Environmental Health  
and Radiation Protection**

*"To protect and improve the health of all Ohioans"*

# Sewage Backup in a Food Service Operation

A sewage backup is the overflow of sewage from equipment or plumbing facilities within a food service operation. Sewage is liquid waste that contains animal or vegetable matter in suspension or solution and may also include liquids containing chemicals in solution. Clear water waste (i.e. ice bin/machine drainage, condensation from refrigeration and air conditioning equipment) is not considered sewage. In the event of a sewage backup, food service operations should notify their local health department.

## Be Prepared

The following measures can help a facility be prepared to quickly respond to a sewage backup event and may help minimize the impact on the facility's operation:

- Develop a list of equipment and fixtures that have a drain. What specific steps would you take if each piece of equipment or a combination were no longer operable due to a drainage problem?
- Develop a contingency plan for toilets. If toilets no longer function, where will you and your employees find toilet facilities available for use?
- Have procedures available for appropriate cleaning and disinfection after a sewage backup.
- Maintain a list of contact information for people who can help you, such as:
  - Plumber/Drain cleaning service
  - Professional cleaning service
  - Utility company
  - Septic tank pumping service
  - Sewage system installer/ contractor
  - Portable toilet rental service
  - Local health department
  - Local/state building department

## When a backup occurs...

The facility's "Person-In-Charge" (PIC) is responsible for conducting both the initial and ongoing assessments to ensure consistent compliance with Ohio Uniform Food Safety Code requirements.

In the event of an emergency involving sewage backup, multiple factors should be considered when determining the appropriate food service operation response, including but not limited to:

- The complexity and scope of food service operations;
- The duration of the emergency event;
- The impact on other critical infrastructure services (e.g. food, equipment, utensils, linens, and single service/single-use items, and employee health); and
- The availability of alternative procedures that can be used to meet the requirements of the Ohio Uniform Food Safety Code.

Depending on the severity of the backup, it may be necessary to close the operation until the necessary repairs and clean-up can be completed.

## Response

If there is a continuous or active overflow of sewage into the operation, the facility must discontinue operation immediately and take corrective actions to repair the back-up. In the case of plugged drain lines, the operator should contact a service company to find and remove the obstruction and replace any worn or damaged plumbing as needed.

If the onsite sewage treatment system is malfunctioning, contact a septage hauler that is registered with the local health department to pump the septic tank and haul away sewage to an approved disposal site until appropriate repairs can be completed. A registered sewage treatment system installer may also be required for repairs to be made. A sewage permit from the local health department or a plumbing permit from the local or state plumbing department may be required for the repair or installation of sewage system or plumbing equipment. If necessary, barricade the affected area to keep the public and employees away from areas having exposed sewage.

Depending on the impact of the event, the following are *temporary* alternative procedures that may be taken to address specific affected food operations during a sewage backup emergency. **Local health department approval must be obtained before using any of these temporary measures:**

### **Equipment**

If equipment directly connected to the plumbing system is either slow to drain or does not drain:

- Remove the affected equipment/fixture from service;
- Remove the obstruction or call a service company;
- Thoroughly clean any spills with detergent solution followed by a disinfectant solution;
- Keep food traffic away from the affected area;
- Use other properly operating appliances or fixtures in the establishment.

### **Handwashing Sinks**

If handwashing sinks in the establishment do not drain:

- Chemically treated towelettes (wet-naps) may be used for cleaning hands *ONLY* if food exposure is limited, the food items offered are pre-packaged or otherwise protected from contamination by hands, no bare-hand contact with food will occur, and a functioning handwashing facility is available at the toilet room location; or
- Hot water can be placed into an insulated container with a spigot which can be turned on to allow clean, warm water to flow over the hands. A container should be placed under the spigot to collect the waste water, which must be emptied into an operational utility/mop sink or toilet. Provide suitable hand cleaner, disposable towels, and a waste receptacle.

If appropriate alternative handwashing facilities cannot be provided, the facility should discontinue operation until the sink is repaired.

### **Restrooms**

If toilet facilities do not drain:

- Toilet rooms that are not conveniently located but still accessible to employees during all hours of operation may be used until service is restored.

The facility should discontinue operation if no alternate toilet facilities are available.

### **Food Preparation Sinks**

If food preparation sinks do not drain, including all sinks required for thawing food, washing fruits and vegetables, and preparing food:

- Thaw food in the refrigerator or as part of the cooking process;
- Use fresh or refrigerated foods that do not require thawing;
- Use packaged or canned fruits and vegetables that do not require washing;
- Modify the menu to avoid procedures requiring the use of a food preparation sink.

### **Warewashing Sinks/Equipment**

If warewashing sinks/equipment do not drain properly, including dish machines, three-compartment sinks, and pot sinks:

- Discontinue dish/utensil washing and only use single-service/single-use utensils, tableware, etc.;
- Discontinue affected operations after supply of clean equipment, utensils, and single-service items is exhausted;
- Discontinue operation if the facility is unable to continue food preparation and service through use of single-service items.

### **Utility/Mop Sink**

If the utility/mop sink does not drain:

- Discontinue use of the utility/mop sink;
- Dump mop water into a functioning toilet;
- Discontinue operation if the physical facility cannot be maintained in a sanitary condition.

## Recovery

Recovery involves the necessary steps for returning to a normal safe operation and re-opening the facility. A food service operation that has been ordered or otherwise required to cease operations may not re-open until the local health department has granted authorization.

### Personal Health and Safety

The following measures are recommended for employees involved in clean-up:

- Wear eye protection;
- Wear rubber gloves and boots that can be washed and disinfected after the event;
- Wear protective clothing such as coveralls;
- Do not walk between the affected area and other areas of the establishment without removing footwear and protective clothing;
- Follow label requirements for handling detergents, sanitizers, disinfectants, and other chemicals used in the cleaning process;
- Immediately wash hands after working with contaminated materials and before engaging in food preparation activities (working with exposed food, clean equipment/utensils, unwrapped single service/single use articles, etc.);
- Clean hands and exposed portions of the arms using a cleaning compound in a lavatory that is properly equipped by vigorously rubbing together the surfaces of lathered hands and arms for at least 20 seconds and thoroughly rinsing with clean, warm water;
- Dry hands using disposable paper towels; and
- Have janitorial staff clean and disinfect the lavatory faucets and other portions of the lavatory after use to prevent transferring any contamination to food service workers.

### General Clean-Up

An assessment of the condition of the facility should be completed to determine whether facility staff can adequately clean and sanitize all affected areas, or a professional cleaning service with expertise in cleaning and disinfecting food service operations should be utilized.

- Remove any standing sewage;
- Remove wet materials. Dispose of any materials that cannot be effectively cleaned and disinfected;
- Floors, walls, furnishings, and carpet damaged beyond salvage must be removed and replaced as necessary;
  - Carpets should either be removed or steam cleaned.
- Affected walls, floors, and equipment surfaces must be cleaned with soap and water, rinsed, and disinfected.
  - Use a detergent solution to clean floors, equipment, and other affected areas, followed by a clean water rinse.
  - Disinfect the floor and any other affected areas by following label instructions for disinfection.
  - Launder or discard mop heads and other cleaning aids that contacted sewage.
- Allow the affected area to air-dry.
- Any food equipment or utensils that have come in contact with sewage must be cleaned and disinfected, and then properly washed, rinsed and sanitized.
  - Utensils and equipment that cannot be thoroughly cleaned and sanitized or are damaged beyond salvage must be discarded and replaced as necessary.

### Linens, Single-Service/Single-Use Items

Linens that have been contaminated by the sewage backup should be properly laundered to remove contaminants or discarded. For single-service/single-use items that have been in contact with sewage must be discarded.

- Launder any linens or uniforms that come in contact with sewage.
  - Launder separately from other linens.
  - Use detergent, bleach, and hot water to launder linens.
- Use a mechanical dryer for drying the clean linens.

## **Reopening**

If the food service operation has been temporarily closed, the local health department must be contacted prior to re-opening the food service operation to determine compliance.

## **General Food Salvage Assessment**

Sewage can make foods unsafe to eat, especially if packaging is contaminated. Food that has come into contact with sewage must not be served or consumed and should be discarded.

## **Disposal of Food**

If it is determined that food must be discarded, store the food in an area designated for storage of condemned food, separate from food preparation and equipment storage, and secured in covered refuse containers or other isolated areas, to prevent either service to the public or accidental contamination of the facility and other food.

If foods must be retained until the distributor can credit the facility, they must be stored separately and clearly labeled as "NOT FOR SALE".

Discarded perishable food may be stored in a refrigerated location separate from other food and held for credit until recorded by food supplier/distributor.

Small volumes of food to be discarded can be denatured with a cleaning product (i.e. bleach) and placed in a covered refuse bin outside the facility.

Large volumes of food should be stored in covered refuse containers in a secure location and removed by a refuse disposal company as soon as possible.

All food waste is to be disposed in accordance with state and local regulations.

Local landfills should be contacted prior to delivery of food from a private individual or carrier to ensure acceptance.