



**BAYKEEPER®**

## **Sick of Sewage? How You Can Help**

Used water from our toilets, sinks, showers and washing machines travels from our homes and businesses through a complex maze under city streets to a treatment plant, where bacteria and pollutants are removed before the water is sent into San Francisco Bay. Along the way, a lot can go wrong, potentially spewing dirty wastewater into basements, city streets, and waterways.

Many Bay Area cities – like many cities around the country – are built above crumbling pipe systems built in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and have been severely neglected ever since. As a result, large amounts of rainwater seep into the sewer system through the crumbling pipes, swelling the volume of waste flowing into treatment plants. When this happens, treatment plants discharge the contaminated mixture into the Bay after filtering out large solid matter, but without removing bacteria and other pollutants. When that happens, you might not see toilet paper in the Bay, but that doesn't mean it's clean – or safe – water.

In the long term, solutions to this problem include ensuring that our federal, state and local governments invest in long overdue infrastructure improvements and making sure regulatory agencies enforce clean water laws.

In the short term, here are some tips on how you can help prevent sewage spills to the Bay:

- 1. Minimize water use during big rain events.** Wait to wash clothes or run the dishwasher until the rain stops to lessen the burden on the sanitary system. Reduce water use by installing low-flow toilets and shower heads, and turn off the water when you shave or brush your teeth.
- 2. Inspect your sewer cleanout.** The cleanout typically is a small pipe, about 4 inches in diameter, used to access the lateral line for cleaning. Make sure the cap to the cleanout pipe is on and has not been damaged, and replace it if necessary to prevent rain water from entering the sewer system.
- 3. Have your lateral line inspected and replaced if necessary (or urge your landlord to do so).** A lateral line connects the pipes in your house to the main city lines. These lateral lines are often old and frequently cause sewer backups from blockages or tree roots. Make sure you use a reputable company with a permit to replace your connection. Call your local Department of Public Works for more information on local grants or loans to help pay for some of the costs.

- 4. Think about your lateral line when you plant trees and shrubs.** Plant roots are one of the most common causes of sewer line problems. Avoid planting trees and shrubs near your lateral line.
- 5. Eliminate any connections between your storm sewer and sanitary sewer pipes.** Disconnect your downspouts and sump pumps if they are connected to the sanitary sewer system. These connections cause spills and are illegal.
- 6. Don't put fats, oils or grease down the drain.** These substances clog both your plumbing and the sewer system, causing backups. Pour the grease into a can and throw it in the trash instead.
- 7. Dispose of household chemicals and automotive fluids properly – not down household drains or curbside storm drains.** Regular overflows wash whatever you put down your drain into your local creek and the Bay or ocean.
- 8. Consider installing a gray water system to capture and reuse nearly-clean water for your garden.**
- 9. Consider installing a composting toilet.**
- 10. Become a member of San Francisco Baykeeper.** Help support our Sick of Sewage Campaign. Visit [www.baykeeper.org](http://www.baykeeper.org).

Founded in 1989, San Francisco Baykeeper is the Bay's pollution watchdog, using science and advocacy to reform policy and enforce clean water laws. [www.baykeeper.org](http://www.baykeeper.org)