Drains and Odours

Complete

Property Management Solutions Ltd



Drainage systems ensure we have dry, clean and healthy buildings to live in. Because drains and pipes are out of sight and generally work efficiently, most people take them for granted. Property owners only pay attention to blocked drains when the damage is done, giving their drains little regard when all is well. Ideally, every property owner should know what causes blocked drains and pipes, how to prevent them, and what to do when the worst happens.

What causes sewage and drain smells?

There is nothing worse than a smell in your kitchen or bathroom that you simply cannot trace or eliminate. All the disinfectant in the world poured down the sink only relieves the smell temporarily. Common causes of smelly bathrooms and kitchens are:

- The number ONE cause of sewage smells inside a property is the lack of a soil vent pipe to vent the drains. These SVP's prevent the stench from going into the house and vent it out of the top of the SVP instead.
- The new bath or shower has a continental 'easy-plumb' waste fitted. These are very common in new bathroom fittings and are becoming almost standard for showers, as they enable a low profile shallow shower tray to be fitted. The problem is that they do not have a trap at all and sewer gases come back up the pipes if the tray plug is not screwed back in place after the shower is used.
- A bird has built a nest in the soil vent pipe, preventing the smell from escaping.
- If the sink, shower or bath has not been used for a while, the water in the traps may have evaporated, allowing drain gases to leak back through the plug holes. Run the water once every week or so. Plumbing pipes lead to the sewer, but they're designed with suction to keep sewer-gas fumes out of your drains. To work properly, they need to hold a small amount of water. If all the water evaporates from your drains, the gases build up and fumes can waft up through the drain and into the room.
- The soil vent pipe is too small or has a cowl fitted that is too restrictive to air flow, causing a 'syphon' effect when water is flushed down the drains and creating a semi vacuum in the pipe This pulls water out of the trap, causing an imperfect seal and allowing the smell to leak back through the plug hole.
- The soil vent pipe (SVP) ends in the loft space. There are air currents in the loft space which is never totally sealed, so, normally, the smell leaks out to the outside. But on still and 'heavy' days the heavy gases, such as Hydrogen Sulphide, may find their way into the living spaces.
- The soil vent pipe is too close to a window opening, particularly Velux roof windows. This means that in certain wind conditions smells will blow in through the open window.
- Soil vent pipes which are not covered by a cowl or vent cap. When the wind blows from a certain direction air can be forced down the SVP as it drops over the roof. Trees and other buildings in the vicinity can have the same effect when the wind is in a certain direction. The gases that should be released by the SVP are instead forced back into the drain system and into the property, increasing your problems.
- If the drain smell is coming from only one drain, the pipe under that sink could be obstructed. The bend in the pipe called a P-trap can collect hair, toothpaste, gel, dirt and other gunk that will smell if it sits in there long enough. Remove the P-trap and clean it out. To dissolve the clog without removing the trap, pour an enzyme-based cleaner down the drain every day until the enzymes can eat away at the organic waste trapped there. Then, treat the drains regularly to prevent future clogs.

- Sometimes, a bad smell in the sink comes from the water and not the drain. Fill your sink with hot water. Let it sit for a minute, then put your nose close to the water and breathe deeply. If it smells bad, the culprit is probably the water heater. Replace the anode rod in your water heater, which corrodes over time. Sometimes called a "sacrificial anode," the metal rod is designed to deteriorate in order to protect other exposed metals in the tank. Rods last six months to six years or more.
- A front-load washing machine has a door seal that is airtight to keep water from spilling out. So when you close the door after emptying the machine, water doesn't have a way to evaporate. That can create smelly mould and mildew. Leave the door open when the washer isn't in use. If you want to keep the door closed so kids can't climb in there, try washing every fourth or fifth load of clothes such as bath towels in hot water. Or buy a product designed to remove odours from high-efficiency washers.

Blocked drains

When a drain blocks, the water that is trying to escape can't flow through the drain and fills the pipe, backing up to its source and can lead to flooding. The source could be a kitchen sink, toilet bowl, washing machine or a bath. Not only does this cause water damage to the property's structure and wiring, electrical appliances can be damaged irreparably.

Drain blockages are more than just an inconvenience; they can be a health and safety issue. Most water that we throw away is dirty water. Water that has been backing up in a blocked drain is much dirtier than water that has just been thrown away. It has been lying as a breeding ground for harmful bacteria, and is especially worse if the backed up water is from the toilet.

In the event that a drainage system becomes blocked and is back-flowing into the property, the blockage must be attended to immediately to reduce the spread of dirty water and risk of infection. After the blockage has been dealt with, the affected areas of the property must be sanitised to Health and Safety Inspectors' standards. If you are concerned about whether or not your blocked drain is a health risk, a professional drain cleaning company will give good advice, or contact your local Environmental Health Department.

Common causes of blocked drains

- **Grease and fat** This is one of the most common causes of all, yet it is also one of the easiest to prevent. Any fatty substances washed down sinks will stick to the inside of the pipes, eventually building up so much that no more liquid can pass through. This can be easily avoided by keeping a watchful eye over the liquids which you do decide to wash away. Let fat harden and then scrape into your bin rather than washing it down your sink.
- **Hair** A build-up of hair can also pose a large problem and over time this can worsen if the blockage is not quickly cleared, preventing liquid from passing through it altogether. Although this can be helped by using devices which catch the hair before it enters the pipes, you should still pay close attention to this simple, yet avoidable issue. Do not allow hair to drain down into the pipes.
- Foreign objects Blocked drainage can occur when foreign objects or materials such as soaps, fats or food build up become caught between the drainpipe and the pipes that flow underneath. Initially the material may not fully block the drain, but over time materials will continue to collect which will prevent water from flowing freely and could eventually cause the drain to block. Toilets regularly block up due to too much toilet paper being flushed down them. Also, sanitary items, wet wipes and nappies should not be flushed down toilets.

Who pays for blocked drains in apartment blocks?

Typically, blocked drains are caused by the action of only a few residents. If you have a blockage in your drain you need to investigate your own drains and pipes first. If you find the blockage in your own pipes then you will be responsible for paying to have your drains/pipes unblocked (particularly is the pipe is solely serving your property). If after investigation, you establish the blockage is not in your pipes you should notify your managing agent. If the problem is with a communal pipe then the estate will pay for the drains/pipes to be unblocked.