

Household customer

Wastewater flooding guidelines



We are very sorry that you have recently suffered wastewater flooding to your property.

This leaflet has been designed to answer some of your immediate questions and concerns, and provide a source of information for you.

What causes wastewater flooding?

Unusually prolonged or heavy rainfall, typically in the form of severe localised storms, can overwhelm drainage systems. This can cause flooding, particularly in low-lying areas. Other factors which cause flooding are:

Sewer blockages

Blockages occur when something stops water from flowing freely in a drain or sewer pipe. Common causes of this are:

Fat and grease - if poured down sinks can set hard and completely block sewers. These blockages are often difficult to remove.

Paper and cloth products

- disposable nappies, sanitary towels, cotton woolbuds and newspaper can easily become stuck in drains and sewers. They can form a solid mass and eventually stop the flow of water.

Often there are separate wastewater systems for foul and surface water. Each house has two connections - one carrying waste from toilets and sinks to the foul sewer and one to take rainwater from roofs and surface drains to the surface water sewer.

The foul-wastewater system is designed to carry away the normal contents of sinks, washbasins, baths, showers and toilets. To minimise the risk of blockages, all other household waste materials should be disposed of by other means, usually 'bag and bin it'.

The surface water-wastewater system is designed to carry away rain water from roofs, paved areas, patios and so on. Blockages in this system are more likely to be caused by tree roots and damage to pipes.

Incorrect drain connections

Sometimes, customers or builders connect drains to the wrong sewer or water fittings to the wrong drains. This can mean that foul-wastewater enters the surface water-wastewater system causing pollution of local streams or surface water pours into the foul sewer causing overflows at times of heavy rain.

Over-loaded sewers

The amount of wastewater discharged into the sewers has increased due to gradual new developments, the concreting of grassland for car parking, patios and other instances of similar nature.

Flooding from other drainage systems

Flooding is occasionally caused by surface water from the highway, which is the responsibility of the Highway Authority. They are responsible for the maintenance of road gullies and highway drains, whereas Thames Water is responsible for providing the capacity in our surface water sewers and their maintenance.

Flooding can also be from land drainage ditches, which are usually the responsibility of the landowner, or the local authority.

Flooding from rivers

The Environment Agency is responsible for building, maintaining and operating most river flood defences. Sometimes high river levels can cause other drainage systems, including sewers to back up and cause flooding.

Contacting your insurers

If your property has been flooded by wastewater, it is important that you contact your home insurer immediately and inform them of any damage which has occurred as a result.

Customers suffering from wastewater flooding in their home may be considered for a goodwill payment. This is usually paid to customers who have had particular financial hardship and as a result have no household insurance. This can be applied for by writing to us at the address shown at the back of this leaflet.

It is also important that we are made aware each time you are flooded to ensure that our information is correct when planning a solution to the problem.

What health risks are there?

There should be no risk to health providing that reasonable precautions are taken:

- protective clothing such as rubber gloves should be worn during clearing up and any cuts or grazes should be covered
- food which may have been in contact with flood water should be thrown away
- if you have any symptoms such as diarrhoea or vomiting after a flood, call your doctor immediately.

The following advice regarding the impact of wastewater flooding in gardens and other outdoor areas and how it should be dealt with is based on guidelines provided by the Water Research Centre (WRc).

Minimum number of days to keep off flooded outdoor areas

Season	Turf/Clay	Soil/Sand
Spring	13	20
Summer	6	9
Autumn	13	20
Winter	18	11

A disinfectant can be used on tarmac and paved areas to speed up the process but wastewater on soil or grassed areas is best left to decay naturally. On outdoor areas any excess water should be removed and the area should not be used for recreational purposes within the number of days shown in the above table. It is not advisable to “dig in” any waste debris as this will slow down the action of sunlight.

Most bacteria from wastewater on gardens, lawns, tarmac and other paved areas will be rendered harmless within days – through the action of sunlight. For example, in WRC research on turf and clay, amounts fell to normal background levels within 6 days during summer, rising to 18 days in winter.

If you have any additional concerns about possible health risks you may wish to contact your local Council’s environmental health officer who may be able to offer further advice.

Maintain personal hygiene in all instances

What will happen next?

Customers whose buildings have suffered internal flooding will receive the following assistance:

- for all customers, there will be the option of a basic clean up service which will include:
 - removing solids left after flooding
 - washing down of the affected areas
 - disinfecting
 - pumping out of basements
- for each internal flooding incident, a letter confirming what action is to be taken and a Customer Guarantee Scheme payment equivalent to the annual wastewater charge up to a maximum of £1,000 will be made

- if we cannot identify the cause of the flooding at the time, we will aim to conclude our investigation within 30 days and send you a further letter advising you of what will happen next.

For those customers who have been unfortunate enough to have experienced internal flooding on more than one occasion, Thames Water will contact you directly to discuss your individual circumstances.

For external flooding, a Customer Guarantee Scheme payment of 50% of the wastewater charge can be claimed where there has been significant inconvenience or serious loss of amenity to the customer.

A payment made under the Customer Guarantee Scheme does not mean that we accept responsibility for the flooding.

Our customer guarantees do not apply when events beyond our control prevent us from meeting our specified standards. These events include extreme weather conditions.

What are Thames Water doing to stop wastewater flooding?

We are tackling the problem of flooding in order of priority and in doing this we consider three key points:

- how serious is the flooding
- how likely is a repeat flooding
- what is the cost of the solution relative to the number of homes affected.

It is necessary to ensure that when looking at a solution to any flooding problem it does not create a problem elsewhere.

Depending on local circumstances, we may consider a range of things to reduce the risk of flooding, such as:

- more regular sewer cleaning in areas of known flood risk to minimise the possibility of blockages occurring
- seeking ways to stop wastewater backing up from our sewers into property or spilling out of manholes
- correcting any minor defects.

If these solutions are not feasible, we will then investigate an engineering solution. However, these solutions can take a long time to design and implement, as well as often being very costly. They include:

- building new sewers to increase the capacity of the local system
- putting in pumping stations to pump the wastewater away more quickly
- providing storm overflows to allow surplus water to escape without causing flooding

- sealing sewers to stop groundwater seeping into them
- providing storage, such as underground tanks or environmental ponds, so that storm water can overflow harmlessly from the sewers.

Because these sorts of engineering solutions may take time to be carried out, we may offer to carry out some minor works at or near your property, if this would help. These works will help to reduce the risk of internal flooding or the impact it might have.

Getting in touch

You can contact Thames Water 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. We record all our calls to ensure that we always give you a quality service.

0845 9200 800

- For emergencies
- Other non-billing enquiries
- Literature

Minicom service if you are deaf or hard of hearing
0845 7200 898

0845 9200 888

- Queries relating to your bill
- Change of address
- Meter readings

Voicemail service for customers' own meter readings:
0845 300 1131
Minicom service if you are deaf or hard of hearing
0845 7200 899

To contact us from abroad:
+44 1793 366011

If you prefer you can write to us at:
Thames Water PO Box 286 Swindon SN38 2RA

Visit the Thames Water website on
www.thameswateruk.co.uk

Have you any comments about this leaflet?
We will be happy to hear from you regarding this or any other matter where our service to you could be improved.

This leaflet can be supplied in large print, braille or audio-tape upon request.