



Sewer Testing with Smoke: What Homeowners Need to Know

Healthy sewer systems mean healthy communities. There are many activities underway to protect our sewer system in Santa Barbara – one of them involves “smoke testing” which identifies and addresses cracks or leaks that allow other water sources into the wastewater system, potentially overloading our wastewater treatment plant. While it’s a normal maintenance procedure, we want to make sure you’re aware and understand what you’re seeing if smoke appears.

Finding Leaks

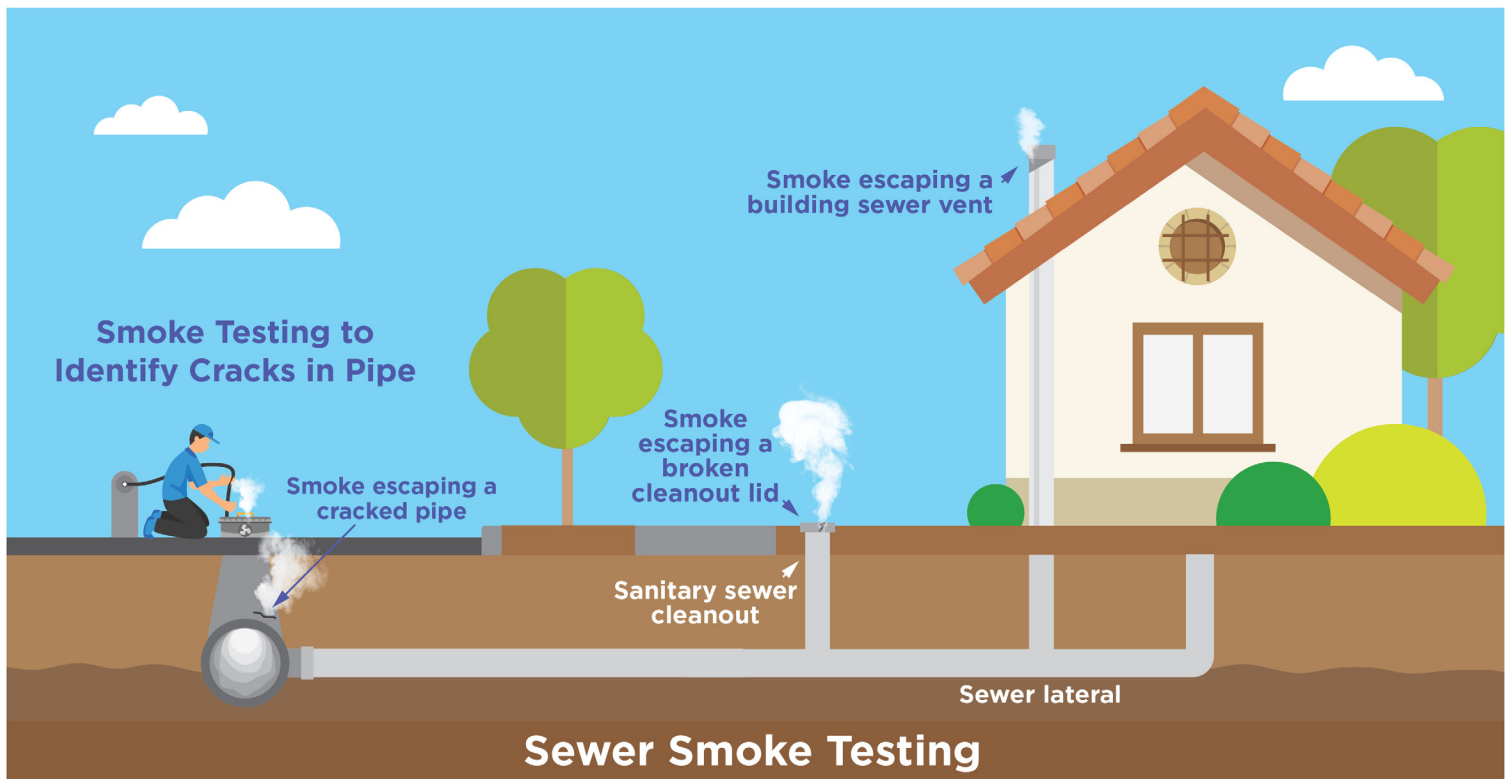
In Santa Barbara, we have a storm drain system that carries rainwater to creeks and the ocean. A separate sewer system carries wastewater from homes and businesses to the El Estero Water Resource Center, where it is cleaned and released to the ocean. If rainwater gets into the sewer pipes, it can cause problems such as sewer overflows – and no one wants that.

What is a sewer test using smoke?

Sewer testing uses safe, non-toxic smoke to help our crews identify cracks or leaks in the public sewer system or on private property, so they can be repaired either by the City or homeowner. This type of testing using smoke is the industry-standard and preferred method of identifying these issues and prolonging the health of our sewer system.

Is the smoke hazardous?

The smoke generated is safe, non-toxic, and manufactured for this purpose. It will not harm any plants or animals and will not leave any residuals or stains. The testing smoke has a distinctive but not unpleasant odor, with visibility lasting only a few minutes. People with respiratory sensitivities should avoid exposure to all types of smoke, including this type.



What to Expect

- City Collections staff will place a blower on top of a manhole in the street, forcing smoke down into the sewer.
- If all sewer connections are working properly and there are no open faults in the home, all smoke should run through the sewer lines and out of nearby roof vents. This is normal.
- If smoke is exiting the ground where there is no connection to the sewer lines, this indicates a place where rainwater could enter the sewer system, a situation that needs to be addressed.
- Smoke may be visible in your neighborhood for several hours after these tests.
- During a smoke test, crews will walk around the neighborhood, take pictures of any faults or issues in the system where smoke is coming out of the ground, and mark locations for repair.
- Crews will conduct these tests during work hours, Monday through Friday 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

What does it mean if smoke is in my yard or driveway?

This could mean that a storm drain on the property is connected to the sewer lateral or that the lateral has breaks or cracks in the pipe, causing rainwater infiltration that contributes to sewer backups and overflow. If you see or smell the testing smoke within your home, this may also indicate a deficient private plumbing system. It is the homeowners responsibility to get a professional plumber to address these issues on private property – to maintain the health of your property too.

What does it mean if smoke is in my house? What should I do?

- In the unusual event of smoke entering your home, you should open doors and windows and leave the house until the smoke dissipates.
- It is important to immediately notify a member of the City smoke testing crew working in your area, so the fault or issue can be identified.
- You should also call a licensed plumber and repair the issue as soon as possible.
- The presence of smoke means there is an open fault where sewer gas has been entering the home for months or years. This sewer gas is poisonous and highly dangerous to residents.
- The smoke is harmless and leaves no residue—it serves only to identify open faults in the house's plumbing. Once inside the house, the smoke will dissipate in approximately 20-30 minutes.
- This type of testing may also activate smoke alarms in your house. Please open windows or doors for ventilation.

If you see smoke near your home during these tests and have questions or concerns, please do not call 9-1-1 but contact the City at (805) 568-1080.

DID YOU KNOW?

The sewer smoke tests will help the City detect cracks through which rainwater could enter the City's wastewater system and overload our treatment plant.



Questions?

Please contact Amador Escalante,
Wastewater Collection System Superintendent,
at (805) 568-1080 or AEscalante@SantaBarbaraCA.gov

For more information on the City of Santa
Barbara's Wastewater Collection System, visit:
SantaBarbaraCA.gov/WastewaterCollection