

What's the Difference between Sanitary and Storm Sewers?



You've seen one drain, you've seen them all. They are all the same, right? I can pour this cleaner down the drain because it goes to a wastewater treatment plant, right? Not so! It's important to understand the difference between sanitary sewers and storm sewers so we can prevent environmental damage.

The **sanitary sewer** is a system of underground pipes that carries sewage from bathrooms, sinks, kitchens, and other plumbing components to a wastewater treatment plant where it is filtered, treated and discharged.

The **storm sewer** is a system designed to carry rainfall runoff and other drainage. It is not designed to carry sewage or accept hazardous wastes. The runoff is carried in underground pipes or open ditches and discharges untreated into local streams, rivers and other surface water bodies. Storm drain inlets are typically found in curbs and low-lying outdoor areas. Some older buildings have basement floor drains that connect to the storm sewer system.

Disposal of chemicals or hazardous substances to the storm sewer system damages the environment. Motor oil, cleaners, paints and other common household items that get into storm drains can poison fish, birds, and other wildlife, and can find their way into drinking water supplies. In addition, grass clippings, leaves, litter, and organic matter can clog storm drains and cause flooding.

Here are some things you can do to help maintain our sewer systems and keep our environment clean:

- Do not pour anything into storm sewer drains.
- Keep storm sewer drains clear of leaves, grass clippings, sticks and litter
- Repair any leaks and drips from your vehicle.
- Collect and recycle motor oil
- Clean up spills and don't wash them into a drain.
- Don't pour paints, solvents, cleaners, etc. into any drain – take it to your local county household hazardous waste collection.
- Minimize the use of herbicides and pesticides.

Having a clean environment is of primary importance for our health and economy. Clean waterways provide recreation, commercial opportunities, fish habitat, and add beauty to our landscape. All of us benefit from clean water - and all of us have a role in getting and keeping our lakes, rivers, wetlands, and groundwater clean. For more easy steps on protecting our lakes and streams, visit www.mywatersheds.org.