

Odors in the Plumbing System

The well-designed and correctly installed plumbing system is odorless. Odors are most likely to arise from leaks in the waste or vent piping or from traps that have lost their water seal. In an incorrectly installed system, there are, of course, many opportunities for odors to result from defects in the system, particularly if it is not properly vented.

Unusual odors should never be ignored. Such odors are often an indication that sewer gas is present. Sewer gas, while not always deadly, is noxious and capable of causing headaches and other minor illnesses. Sewer gas is foul smelling air and should be prevented from entering the house.

If it is suspected that sewer gas is entering through a leak in the piping, a plumber will subject the system to a test either by means of smoke, water or oil of peppermint. The test will indicate the location of the leak.

In order to explain how the sewer gas may enter a house through a plumbing fixture, it is necessary to clarify the function of traps and vents. Every plumbing fixture is the terminus of the city water supply system and the beginning of the city sewerage system. The faucets control the water supply. The traps and vents control the sewer air. They do so by a very simple method. Sewer air will not penetrate a water barrier. Therefore, a device is employed which keeps several inches of water between the house air and the sewer air. This is the trap, which is plainly visible under such plumbing fixtures as sinks and lavatories. It is built into water closets. In the case of bathtubs and shower cabinets, it is usually concealed in the floor or basement.

A trap, however, would lose its water seal by siphonic action every time a fixture is used unless the air on the sewer side is balanced with the air on the house side. This is the function of the vents. Occasionally, due to changes in atmospheric conditions, a compactly vented trap will lose its seal.

Usually, however, when a trap loses its seal it is due either to incorrect design of the vents, absence of vents or to evaporation of the water in the trap. Traps under fixtures that are used infrequently should be filled with water from time to time to insure an adequate trap seal.