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# Home Improvement

## Around The House

With **Zolton Cohen**, Home Repair Expert

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**Q. This week:** I live in a fairly new neighborhood and lately we've been noticing some sewer odors. We smell it around the side of our house and backyard. We have a floor drain in the basement but that's not it. Some days it's pretty bad but most of the time it's not present. The only smell we've had in the house has been from our shower drain on the second floor but Drano took care of that problem.



**Zolton Cohen**  
Home Repair Expert

Neighbors across the street had a problem with their septic and had to have work done on it, so I'm wondering about the competence of our builder's septic subcontractor. There is no evidence of anything wrong in our yard and our neighbors have also smelled it, so we don't know if we have a problem or it's coming from someone else's home. Any ideas on where the smell may be coming from or where to look for problems?

**J.T. Kalamazoo**

**A.** If your neighborhood is new enough that there is still building going on, the odor could be coming from some of the construction activity. Clay soils in particular often have a gassy smell that mimics sewer odor. Wind direction and the amount of bare soil open at any one time, along with humidity and rain, could all factor into such a scenario.

If your neighborhood is built up and there is no open soil around, then the drainfield of your septic system (and also your neighbor's) would be the next logical place to look. You might notice wet spots on the ground above the drainfield if there has been some clogging going on in the system, but it's not always immediately apparent. Check the soil out sometime after a day's worth of clothes washing though, or after a party at your house, and you might find some effluent "breakout" after heavy water usage.

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The last place to check for odor problems of this type is up on your roof. There are probably several PVC plastic plumbing vent pipes penetrating the roof in various places. These vent pipes are necessary to provide air intake into the drainage system when someone flushes water down the drain or a toilet. They allow the pressure to equalize in the drain pipes so the water resting in traps beneath the fixtures isn't pulled out of the pipes, thus breaking the sanitary seal that keeps sewer gas out of the house.

The vents also vent – guess what? - sewer gas into the atmosphere. During certain times of the day and night wind conditions or atmospheric pressure fluctuations can allow sewer gas and its attendant odor to plunge downward instead of diluting itself harmlessly high overhead as it would normally do. When this occurs, periodic olfactory discomfort can arise.

The solution is filtration units for the vent pipes. Several companies manufacture activated carbon vent pipe filters, ranging in price (depending on size) from between about 25 to 75 dollars each. The filters install either on top of the existing pipes, or, better yet, for those in areas where there are freezing winter temperatures, in an in-line version that is cut into the vent pipe in the attic. The filters are said to last from 2-5 years, and some can be sent back for "recharging" of the carbon element. Two companies specializing in these products are [stopsepticodor.com](http://stopsepticodor.com), 1-866-667-8465, or [odorhog.com](http://odorhog.com), 1-800-963-6746.

The difficult part is going to be determining the origination of the odors. If you install the filters on your house but still smell the sewer gas, perhaps your neighbors could use a little early "Christmas present."

*Zolton Cohen is a former ASHI-certified home inspector based in Kalamazoo. Write to Zolton Cohen, Around the House, P.O. Box 2007, Kalamazoo, MI 49003, or contact him through Michigan Live at [www.mlive.com/forums/homeimprovement/](http://www.mlive.com/forums/homeimprovement/).*



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