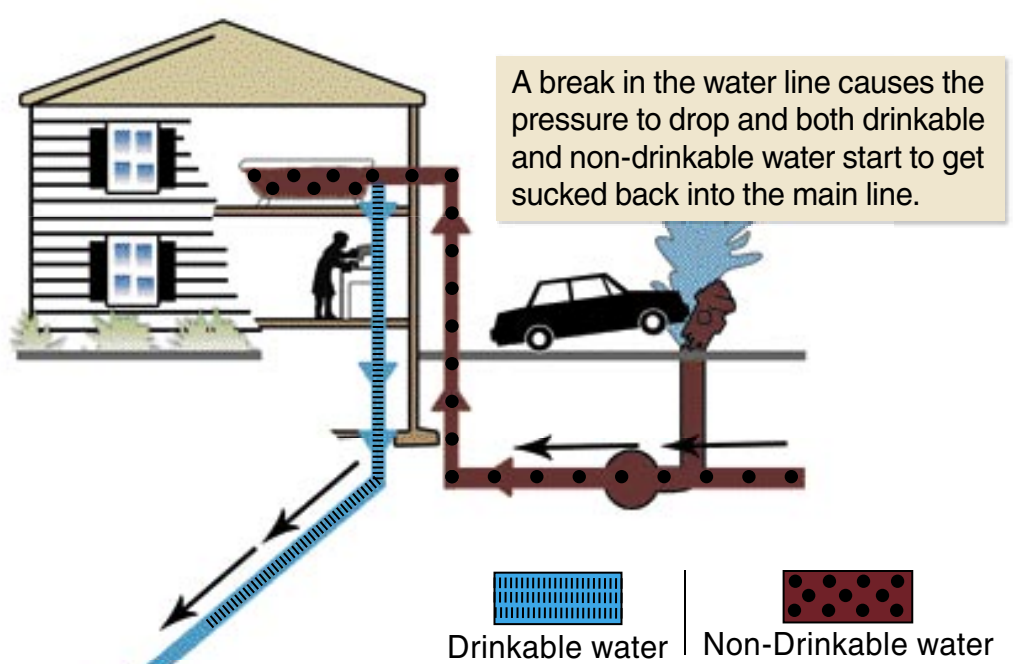
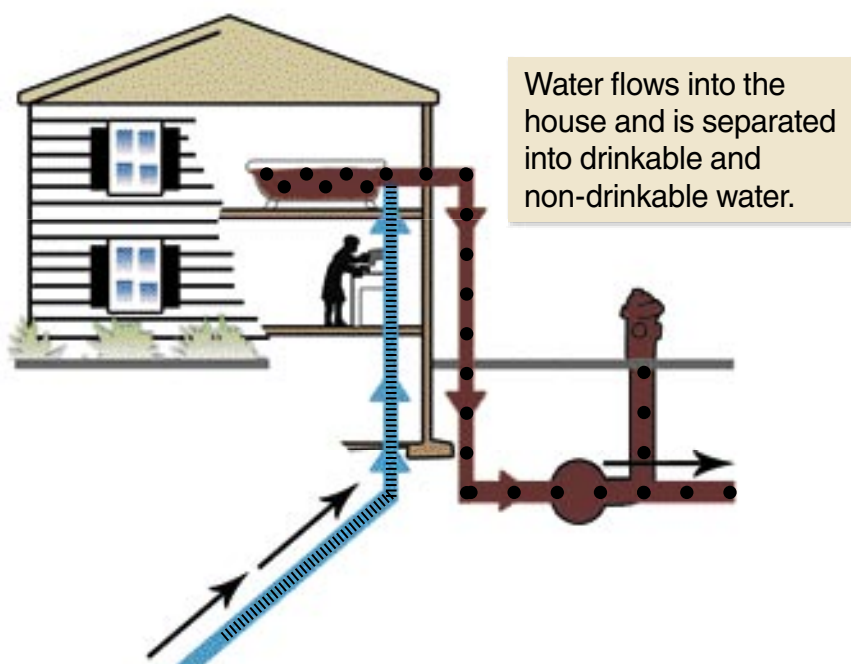


STORYTELLER

IF WATER PRESSURE DROPS ...



HOW CAN YOUR WATER GO BAD?

Without a fairly simple device, it's easy for polluted water to back up into your shower

BY MATT HANLEY STAFF WRITER

What's odorless, tasteless and can tackle an entire college football team?

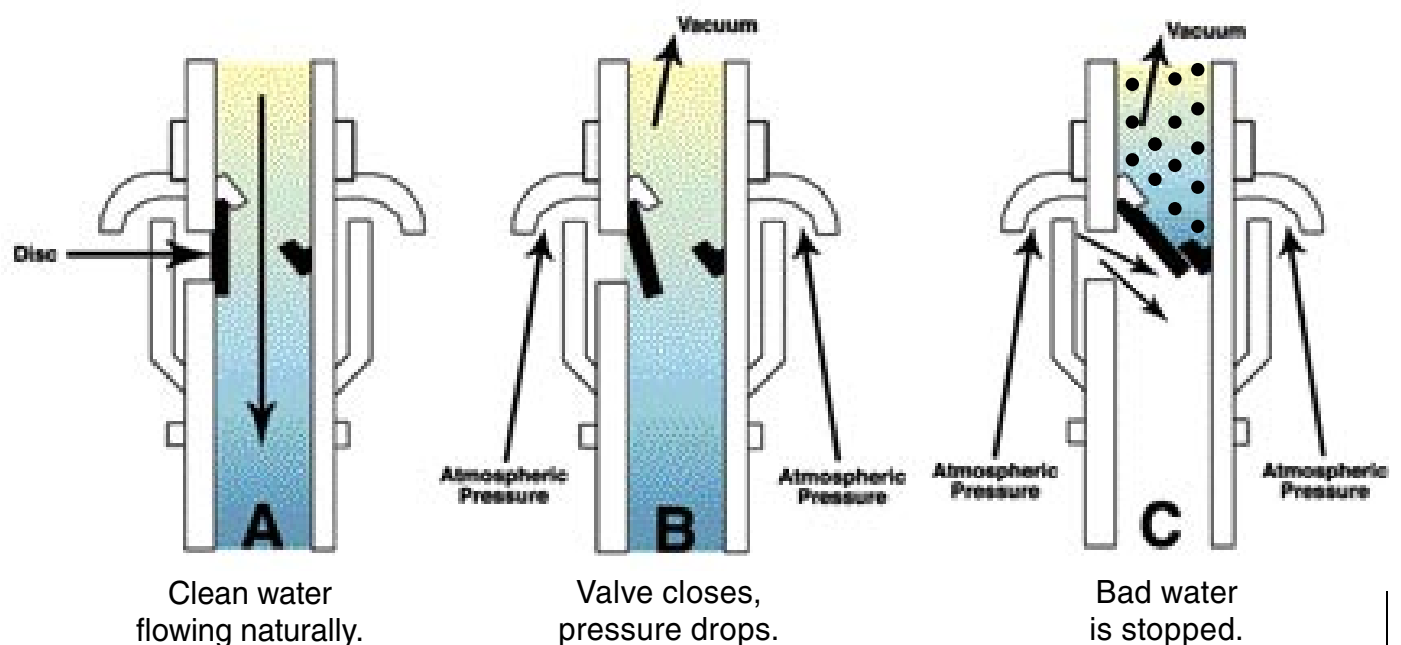
The 1969 Holy Cross varsity squad discovered the answer to that riddle the hard way. That year, 90 out of 97 players on this Massachusetts college team contracted hepatitis A, forcing the school to cancel the season after just two games.

The culprit that knocked out the strong, athletic young men was nothing more intimidating than a drinking fountain on the practice field. Bad plumbing allowed infected water to be sucked into the city's pipes, flowing back to the fountain from which the players were gulping.

It seems improbable that something as supposedly harmless as water can cause so much sickness, but public health officials and local plumbing inspectors are well aware that faulty plumbing is responsible for many illnesses that people typically attribute to the 24-hour flu or "something I ate."

"It happens on a daily basis," said Donald Smith, president of Chicago Backflow Inc., the nation's largest backflow prevention company. "In most instances, people go to a restaurant and get an upset stomach. They blame it on the food. That's not it. It's the water."

... WITH BACKFLOW PREVENTION, WATER IS SAFE.



Valves create a one-way street using vacuum and atmospheric pressure.

What failed the Holy Cross players and caused hundreds of illnesses around the country every year is a phenomenon called "backflow" — when defective plumbing allows toxic chemicals from urine to fertilizer to be sucked back into the drinking water in a home or office.

More than a dozen past and former employees at Nicor's Aurora facility believe their damaged digestive systems, memory problems and persistent dizziness are caused by the same glitch. They believe that in the break room at the company's office at 408 S. River St., where employees routinely filled up coffee pots and water jugs, a pipe was directly connected to the building's boiler system — a claim city documents support.

After years of drinking water that was contaminated with methylene chloride at three times the levels allowed by the Environmental Protection Agency, some

Nicor employees fear irreparable damage has been done to their bodies.

"I really don't think I'll be around for another five years," said Ruben Luna, a former Nicor worker.

'Difficult, technical program'

Stopping backflow on a single pipe is fairly simple, but protecting an entire water system — in a large town like Aurora, for instance — is a major challenge.

"It's a difficult, very technical program, which relies heavily on the plumbers in the state," said Dave McMillan, field operations manager in the Division of Public Water Supply for the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. "We take these situations very seriously because some of the industrial solvents could (create) a

❖ Turn to WATER, SX

... WITHOUT BACKFLOW PROTECTION, WATER COULD BE CONTAMINATED.

