See that opening in the curb? That's not a sewer… it's a storm drain.

What's the difference?

Sewers send wastewater to the city's wastewater treatment plant, where the water is cleaned before it goes to the Rio Grande.

Storm drains capture the runoff from streets, parking lots, driveways, yards, gardens, and even basketball courts, and send the water directly to the Rio Grande.

Why is it important to know the difference? It's important because what flows into the Rio Grande from the storm drain system affects the river… and all of the people and wildlife between Albuquerque and the Gulf of Mexico. If "pollutants" go into the storm drain, the river carries that dangerous mixture with it, exposing people, plants, and wildlife along its course. (examples of pollutants are given below.) Some pollutants may cause health problems in people; others pollutants could harm organisms (plants and animals) coming in contact with them..

How will you know which collection points flow to the river? It's easy! Any drain you see outdoors, that is, any drain that is not inside a building, is typically a storm drain. Storm drain markings can include drain inlets with plaques, tiles, or painted or pre-cast messages warning us not to dump pollutants into the drain.

Common messages on the drains include "No Dumping. Drains to Water Source," "Drains to River," and "You Dump It, You Drink It. No Waste Here!"

In addition, storm drain markers sometimes have pictures to help us get the message, including common aquatic fauna (fish, turtles) or a simple map showing how the water from the drain flows to the nearest water body (the Rio Grande).

Even if a storm drain is not labeled as a storm drain, if you see an opening in the curb, or a grating in the road or next to the curb, IT IS A STORM DRAIN.

How will you know what kinds of materials DO NOT belong in the storm drains? That's easy, too. Here's a list of the most common materials that we could pour into the street or onto the ground, which would then end up in the river.

Pollutants that cause health problems in people:

1. Infectious materials (bacteria, viruses, parasites) which could consist of animal feces, and medical waste (such as used bandages or diseased tree limbs).

2. Organic chemicals (pesticides, plastics, detergents, oil, and gasoline) which could include ant spray and furniture finishes (paint/shellac), some medicines (like cough syrup), and soapy water used to wash the car.

3. Inorganic chemicals (acids, caustics, salts, metals) which could include bleach, drain cleaner, other household cleansers, and most of the other things you keep under your kitchen sink.

4. Radioactive materials (uranium, thorium, cesium, iodine, radon).
   You probably won't have any radioactive materials in your home, but there are a few that you should keep in mind, such as some medications used in chemotherapy.

Pollutants that cause other kinds of problems for living things:

1. Sediment (soil and silt). Some examples are runoff from unpaved areas (dirt yards or driveways), and full-scale land erosion (typically caused by heavy rains or snow runoff).

2. Plant nutrients, which tend to use up all the oxygen in the water (nitrates, phosphates, ammonium). Some examples are fertilizers, sewage (septic tanks), and animal manure. These are also called "oxygen-demanding wastes".

3. Thermal (heat). Most sources of thermal pollution are related to large power plants and industrial cooling towers. Household sources are not a major contributor to thermal pollution.

Remember: **Only rain goes down the drain!**
Anything else could cause problems.