

Maintaining Your Sewage System

Your on-site sewage or “septic” system should give you many years of trouble-free service if it is properly used and maintained. Keep in mind that your sewage system is not the same as a municipal sewer - it has a limited life expectancy, which can be drastically shortened by improper care!

Sewage System Problems:

A failed sewage system presents an imminent health hazard to you, your family and your neighbors. Call the Department of Planning & Environment at (734) 222-3800 at the first signs of failure, and we will assist you in your efforts to remedy the situation. If a sewage system fails, obvious signs appear:

- Toilets back up; drains won't drain.
- Excessive moisture or waste water surfaces over the drainfield.
- Foul odors come from the drainfield or septic tank.

Typical Septic System Components:

- **Pipe from House:** All of your household wastewater exits your home through a pipe which flows into the septic tank.
- **Septic Tank:** The septic tank is a buried, watertight container typically made of concrete, fiberglass, or polyethylene. It holds the wastewater long enough to allow solids to settle out (sludge) and oil and grease to float to the surface (scum). It also allows partial decomposition of the solid materials. Compartments and a T-shaped outlet in the septic tank prevent the sludge and scum from leaving the tank and entering the drainfield.
- **Drainfield:** Every time new wastewater enters the septic tank, the same amount of wastewater exits the tank and is pushed into the drainfield for further treatment. If the drainfield is overloaded with too much liquid, it will flood. This prevents treatment of wastewater, and may cause sewage to flow to the surface of the ground or backup into the house. A reserve drainfield is an area on your property suitable for a new drainfield system if your current drainfield fails. Treat this area with the same care as your current septic system!
- **Soil:** Septic tank wastewater flows to the drainfield, where it percolates into the soil. Microbes in the soil digest or remove harmful bacteria, viruses, and nutrients from wastewater before it eventually reaches groundwater. Soil that allows for percolation is necessary for successful wastewater treatment.

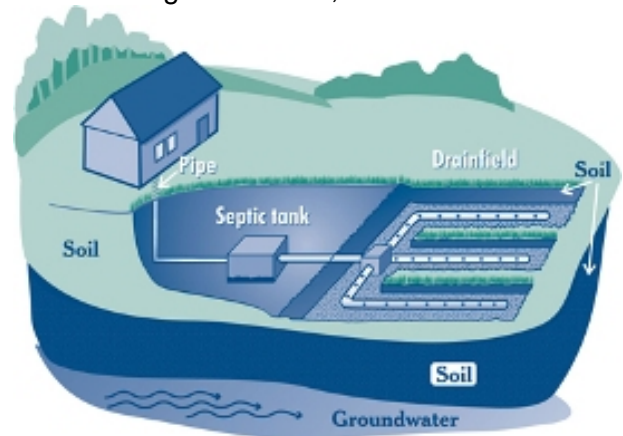


Photo Courtesy U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Four Things You Can Do to Help Your Septic System:

1. Pump your septic tank regularly.
2. Use water efficiently.
3. Manage what goes down drains.
4. Protect your drainfield.

Pump Your Septic Tank Regularly: One of the most important things you can do to keep the system functioning properly is to have the septic tank pumped regularly. If the tank is not pumped regularly, scum and/or sludge could build up and be carried to the drainfield, clogging it. Untreated wastewater may form a pond in the yard or back up into the house. At this point, you will probably be facing costly repairs or replacement, instead of minimal maintenance expenses. Follow these guidelines:

- Know the location of your septic tank cover. Keep the cover easily accessible to the pumper.
- Have your septic tank pumped by a licensed pumper every 3-5 years. Check the yellow pages for pumpers in your area. (With a 2-tank system or 2-compartment tank, pump the first tank or compartment every 3-5 years, and pump the second tank or compartment every other time.)
- Have the pumper inspect the outlet device each time the tank is pumped.
- Do not wash or disinfect the septic tank after it has been pumped.

Maintaining Your Septic System

Page 2

Use Water Efficiently: As a gallon of wastewater flows into the tank from the house, a gallon of effluent flows out of the tank into the drainfield. If wastewater moves in and out of the tank too rapidly due to constant or heavy water flow, solids remaining in the wastewater may move out of the tank into the drainfield, clogging it. Conserve water and spread out water usage by following these suggestions:

- Wash one or two loads of laundry a day, rather than three or more loads in one day.
- Install low-flow water fixtures, low volume toilets, and low water-use appliances.
- Fix all leaking toilets and fixtures immediately. A constant small flow will shorten the system's life.
- Take short showers, and turn off the faucet while brushing teeth or shaving.

Manage What Goes Down Drains: More solids in wastewater will require more frequent septic tank pumping. In addition, a septic tank and drainfield system cannot treat all materials. Follow these tips:

- Your septic system is not a trash can! Don't put dental floss, feminine hygiene products, condoms, diapers, cotton swabs, cigarette butts, coffee grounds, cat litter, paper towels, etc. in the system.
- Do not overuse the garbage disposal. It adds more solids to the system.
- Do not put grease or oils down the drain. They can increase the scum layer in the septic tank.
- Use liquid non-phosphate detergents instead of powdered detergents. Powdered detergents have "fillers" in them that add to the sludge layer.
- Do not dump unwanted pesticides such as herbicides, fungicides, or insecticides down the drain.
- Do not dump paints, thinners, solvents, or excess medications down the drain.
- A septic system can handle typical amounts of cleaners used for routine cleaning, as well as normal amounts of anti-bacterial soaps. Do not overuse cleaning products, and do not dump excess cleaning products down the drain.
- Do not use septic system starters, additives, or feeders. They are unnecessary, and they may actually cause more solids to flow into the drainfield, doing more harm than good!

Protect Your Drainfield: While the drainfield does not require maintenance, a few precautions will help ensure proper functioning and a long service life. Remember that extra water and compaction will reduce the ability of wastewater to percolate through the soil, preventing the drainfield from treating wastewater properly. Follow these tips to protect the drainfield:

- Do not connect "clear water" wastes, such as footing drains, roof drains, water softeners, or dehumidifiers to the septic system.
- Divert water from roofs, down spouts, or any other surface water runoff away from the drainfield.
- Do not add large amounts of water to the drainfield area by using underground sprinklers. Use a manually operated sprinkler only if it is necessary to maintain the grass cover.
- Do not drive vehicles or heavy equipment over the drainfield.
- Do not site dog kennels or other animal confinement units over the drainfield.
- Do not construct driveways, parking lots, sidewalks, patios, or buildings over the septic tank or drainfield. Remember to maintain all required setback distances when adding buildings or other improvements to the property.
- Do not place additional soil over the drainfield, other than to fill slight depressions. A slight mounding over the drainfield will ensure runoff of surface water.
- Keep rodents and other burrowing animals out of the drainfield area.
- Do not plant trees, deep-rooted plants, or gardens on the drainfield. The best cover is grass!
- Consider installing an effluent filter in the septic tank to help prevent solids from entering the drainfield.
- Reserve a replacement drainfield area and manage it the same as the present drainfield.

For More Information:

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Reference: U. S. Environmental Protection Agency's "A Homeowner's Guide to Septic Systems"

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