

Septic 101



If your system is a "standard" system or a gravity system, you should inspect it once every three years, or as needed. Systems that contain an effluent filter or pumps should be checked every year.

Septic tanks are settling chambers. They allow solids and scum time to separate from wastewater, also known as effluent. It is very important to keep the sludge or solids from building up and blocking the outlet baffle in your system. If the sludge layer does get too high, solids could block the pipe to the drainfield, or worse, allow solids into the drainfield.

Be proactive; pump your system as needed and don't wait for a problem to take action. For a typical home, tanks are usually pumped every 3-5 years. Routine pumping can prevent a lot of expensive failures. If you have a home with a garbage disposal, consider a more frequent pumping schedule than the typical 3-5 years. There are 4 major factors that influence how often you should pump;

1. Household size; generally, the more people in the home, the more often you need to pump
2. Total wastewater generated; the more wastewater that is pushed through the system the less efficient your tank is and the more likely your drainfield will become overloaded
3. Septic tank size; the bigger the tank, the more capacity it has for solids and wastewater. This may increase time between pumping.
4. Solids; the more solids in the tank from food waste, grease, or RV waste dumped into your system, the quicker the amount of solids will accumulate

Another way to be proactive is to replace old plumbing fixtures with water efficient ones. Water conservation will extend the life of your drainfield and system as a whole. To reduce your water use;

- Use water saving devices such as faucet aerators and high-efficiency toilets, showerheads, dishwashers, and clothes washing machines
- Repair any leaking plumbing fixtures in the house
- Take shorter showers
- Take baths with less water
- Try to wash only "full loads" of laundry

Your toilet is not a trash can. Avoid throwing the following into your toilet;

- Baby wipes, cleaning wipes, or moist towelettes
- Feminine hygiene products or condoms
- Paper towels, rags, newspaper, cotton balls, dental floss
- Diapers
- Cigarette butts
- Band-aids
- Coffee grounds or cat litter
- Grease and cooking oils

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Your septic system works by utilizing a collection of living organism that digest and treat household waste. Pouring toxins down your drain can kill these organisms.

- Avoid using chemical drain openers for a clogged drain. Use boiling water or a drain snake.
- Never pour cooking oil or grease down the drain. Let it cool, harden, and then discard it in the trash.
- Never pour oil based paints, solvents, or large volumes of toxic cleaners down the drain.
- If you can, eliminate or limit the use of a garbage disposal.
- Septic tank additives sold in stores aren't necessary to keep your septic tank working properly, and they don't reduce or eliminate the need for routine pumping.

Ensure to maintain the area around your system. All water should be diverted away from the system. Avoid any ponding in the drainfield area. During heavy rains, if there is ponding on the surface of your drainfield, try to limit your water usage.

Ensure to protect your system from physical damage. Keep vehicles, heavy equipment and even livestock off your tank, drainfield, and the replacement area. Enough pressure can break lids or pipes, and enough pressure from large equipment can compact the soils. Landscape your system properly, grass is the best cover. Try to keep bushes and trees with large root spread away from your system.

Signs of Septic System Failure

- Water and sewage from toilets, drains, and sinks are backing up
- Bathtubs, showers, and sinks drain slowly
- Gurgling sounds in the plumbing system
- Bad odors around the septic tank or drainfield
- Bright green, spongy lush grass over the septic tank or drainfield, even during dry weather
- Ponding water near system components

Routine maintenance and proper operation will increase the life of your septic system. Inspect annually and pump as needed. Avoid excess water use, and make sure everyone in the household knows what NOT to throw down the drain.

Failing septic systems should be immediately reported so action can be taken. A failing septic system can contaminate well water and nearby surface waters. Failures pose a real threat to drinking water and recreational waters. Report failures as soon as possible to the Health Department.