

# New Homebuyer's Guide to Septic Systems

If you are about to purchase a new home with a septic system, this homebuyer guide is for you!

This guide provides information homebuyers need to know before purchasing a home with a septic system (also known as an onsite wastewater system), how a septic system works, and the importance of having it inspected prior to purchasing a home. In addition, this guide provides information on everyday, preventative, and corrective maintenance for when you are living in your new home.

For additional information, contact your local health department, real estate agent or visit [www.epa.gov/septic](http://www.epa.gov/septic).

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Serving Baraga, Gogebic, Houghton, Keweenaw,  
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## Step 1: Understand your septic system

### Does my new home have a septic system? How do I find it?

You most likely have a septic system if:

- You are on well water;
- The water line coming into your house does not have a meter;
- Your neighbors have a septic system; or,
- You live in a rural area.

You can find your septic system by:

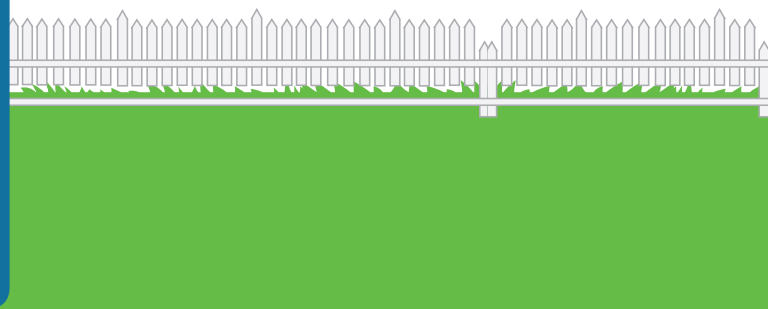
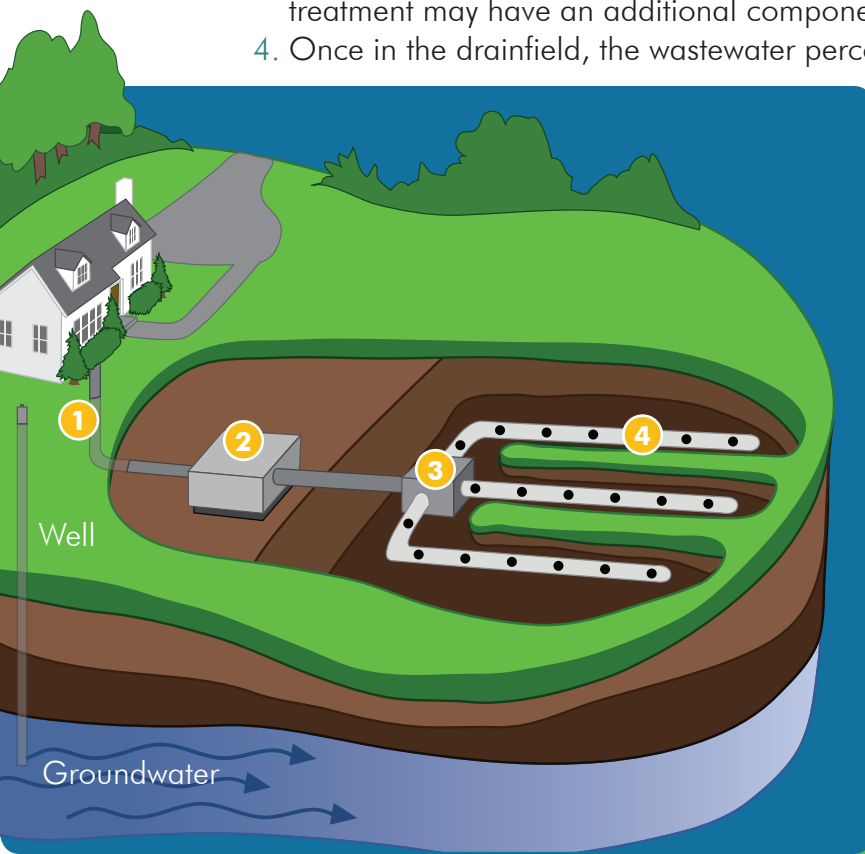
- Looking at the “as built” drawing for your home’s septic system, which you can request from your local (e.g., town, county, or state) health department’s records;
- Checking your yard for inspection caps, lids, or manhole covers;
- Working with a septic system service provider, who can help locate the system; and,
- Asking the seller or realtor.

### How does a septic system work?

1. All water runs out of your house from one main drainage pipe into a septic tank.
2. The septic tank is a buried, water-tight container. Its job is to hold the wastewater long enough for solids to settle to the bottom (sludge) while the fats, oil and grease float to the top (scum).
3. For conventional septic systems, liquid wastewater exits the tank and is spread evenly throughout the drainfield, usually through a distribution box. Systems with more advanced treatment may have an additional component between the septic tank and drainfield.
4. Once in the drainfield, the wastewater percolates into the soil, which reclaims the water

for future reuse by naturally removing harmful bacteria, viruses, and some nutrients.

This process may vary based on the site conditions of your property (e.g., soil type, proximity to water). A septic system service provider and your septic system’s “as built” drawings will be able to tell you what type of system is on the property.



## Step 2: Get your system inspected

### How can I be sure that my septic system is working correctly?

Buying a home is one of the biggest investments you will make, so you want to avoid any surprises after you purchase the home. Just like your furnace, the septic system is expensive to repair or replace so you want it to be in good condition when you buy the home. Have the system inspected by a septic system service provider before you purchase a home. Inspections may be required by your local or state government or by your mortgage lender. Inspection results can help you decide if the home is right for you.

### What should happen during a septic system inspection?

The inspector will check for the following:

- Pumping and maintenance records;
- The age of the septic system;
- Sludge levels and scum thickness in the tank;
- Signs of leakage, such as low water levels in the tank;
- Signs of backup, such as staining in the tank above the outlet pipe;
- Integrity of the tank, inlet, and outlet pipes;
- The drainfield, for signs of system failure like standing water;
- The distribution box, to make sure drain lines are receiving equal flow; and
- Available records, to ensure the system complies with local regulations regarding function and location.

## Step 3: Everyday Maintenance

### What can I do to help maintain my system every day?

The average lifespan of a septic system is 15 to 40 years, but it can last longer if properly maintained!

- Think at the sink. Consider what you put into your toilet and sink and the impact it may have on your system. Many common household items can either clog your system or kill the microbes that treat the wastewater.
  - “Cloggers” include diapers, baby wipes, cat litter, cigarettes, coffee grounds, grease, and feminine hygiene products.
  - “Killers” include household chemicals, gasoline, oil, pesticides, antifreeze, paint, and high amounts of anti-bacterial soaps and detergents.
- Don't strain your drain.
  - The less water you use, the less your septic system has to work. Stagger the use of

- appliances, use high efficiency plumbing fixtures, and repair any leaks in your home.
- For more information, go to <https://www.epa.gov/watersense/>
- Shield your field.
  - Keep your car and anything heavier than your lawnmower off your drainfield.
  - Eliminate or limit the use of a garbage disposal. This will significantly reduce the amount of fats, grease, and solids that enter your septic system and could clog your drainfield.
  - Plant trees away from the drainfield since tree roots can clog the field and cause the system to fail.
  - Keep excess water from irrigation, significant rainfall, or drains off the drainfield.

## Step 4: Preventive Maintenance

### What else can I do to help maintain my system?

A typical septic system should be inspected every three to five years by a septic system service provider. The tank should be pumped as recommended by the service provider or as required by your town, county, or state. Generally, you can plan to have the tank pumped approximately every three to five years. Just like changing the oil in your car, preventive septic system maintenance will extend the life of your system for a small cost compared to the cost of replacing the system.

### What are the costs associated with the maintenance of a septic system?

Your home's septic system should be inspected every three to five years as part of its routine maintenance and pumped as necessary depending on the results of the inspection. The maintenance service typically costs between \$250 to \$500, based on nationwide industry estimates. Maintenance costs are much more affordable compared to the expense of repairing or replacing a septic system which can cost thousands to tens of thousands of dollars. Contact a local septic system service provider who can provide a cost estimate specific to your area and needs. They can also provide you with more accurate information on how frequently to service and pump out your system.

## Step 5: Corrective Maintenance

### How do I know if my septic system is not working properly? What do I do?

There are a few signs of a septic system malfunction. If you discover any of these warning signs, call a septic system service provider immediately. One call could save you thousands of dollars!

- Wastewater backing up or gurgling into household drains.
- A strong odor around the septic tank or drainfield.
- Bright green, spongy grass appearing on the drainfield.

With proper care and maintenance, your septic system will serve your home for years to come. That's why it's important for you to do your part and be SepticSmart!