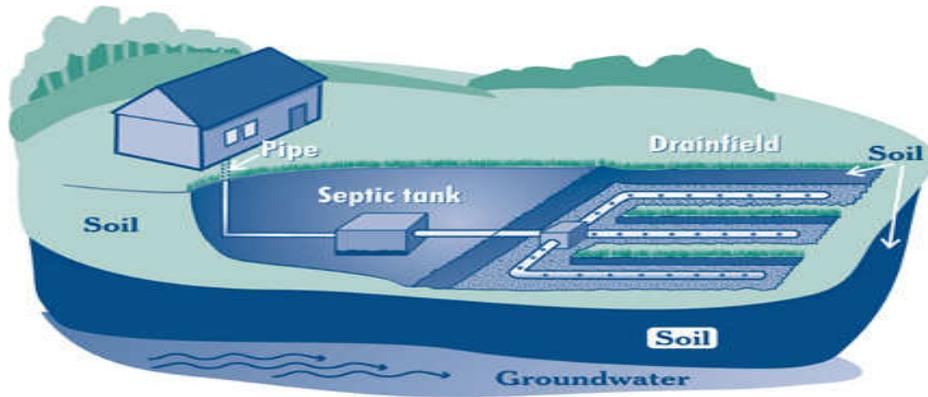


Sewage System Maintenance



A typical septic system consists of two major components, the tank and the dispersal area. The purpose of the tank is to separate the liquids from the solids, and to begin breaking down contaminants. After leaving the tank, effluent flows to a dispersal area where it is further treated by the soil.

How to care for your system

Septic system maintenance involves little effort and can significantly prolong the life of the system. System maintenance can also save you a lot of money in the long run. Sound system operation and maintenance practices include conserving water, being careful that nothing harmful is disposed of through the system, and routinely inspecting and pumping the system. Good maintenance habits can be developed by educating everyone in your household what is and what is not good for your septic system.

Use Water Wisely

Water conservation is very important for septic systems because continual saturation of the soil in the drainfield can affect the quality of the soil and its ability to remove toxins, bacteria, viruses and other pollutants from the wastewater.

Conserve water by taking stock of how it is being wasted. Repair leaking faucets, running toilets and use washing machines and dishwashers only when full. Avoid letting water run while washing hands and brushing teeth. Avoid taking long showers and install water saving fixtures in faucets and shower heads. These features can reduce water use by up to 50%. Low-flush toilets use 1-2 gallons per flush compared to 3-5 gallons used by conventional toilets. Even using a toilet dam or putting a container filled with rocks in the toilet tank can reduce water use by 25%.

It is important to avoid overtaxing your system by using a lot of water in a short time period or by allowing too much outside water to reach the drainfield. Divert roof drains, footing drains, surface water, sump pumps, and water softener brines away from the drainfield

Know What Not to Flush

What you put into your septic system greatly affects its ability to do its job. As a general rule of thumb, do not dispose of anything in your septic system that can just as easily be put in the trash. Remember that your system is not designed to be a garbage disposal, and that solids build up in the septic tank and eventually need to be pumped out.

In the kitchen, avoid washing food scraps, coffee grinds, and other food items down the drain. Grease and cooking oils contribute to the layer of scum in the tank and also should not be put down the drain. Garbage disposals can increase the amount of solids in the tank up to 50% and are not recommended for use with septic systems.

The same common-sense approach used in the kitchen should be used in the bathroom. Don't use the toilet to dispose of plastics, paper towels, tampons, disposable diapers, condoms, kitty litter etc. The only things that should be flushed down the toilet are wastewater and toilet paper.

Avoid Hazardous Chemicals

To avoid disrupting or permanently damaging your septic system, do not use it to dispose of hazardous household chemicals. Even small amounts of paints, varnishes, thinners, waste oil, photographic solutions, pesticides, and other organic chemicals can destroy helpful bacteria and the biological digestion taking place within your system. These chemicals also pollute the groundwater.

Household cleaners, such as bleach, disinfectants, and drain and toilet bowl cleaners should be used in moderation and only in accordance with the product labels. Overuse of these products can harm your system. It makes sense to try to keep all toxic and hazardous chemicals out of your septic tank when possible.

Pump Your Tank Regularly

Pumping your septic tank is probably the single most important thing you can do to protect your system. If the buildup of solids in the tank becomes too high and solids move to the drainfield, this could clog and strain the system to the point where a new drainfield is needed. This health department recommends that you pump your septic tank a minimum of once every 3-5 years. How often your tank needs to be pumped depends on tank size, the number of people living in your home, and the habits of your particular household. Garbage disposals and high water use technologies such as a hot tub or whirlpool also affect the pumping frequency.

Monitor Your System Health

Monitoring the health of your system is a good way to head off future problems. Map out the location of your tank and drainfield so you know where they are located in the future. Maintain access to your septic tank by installing a riser if needed. Watch for potential problems, such as soft or spongy ground over the drainfield (especially after storms), sewage odors in the house or yard, slowly draining sinks, toilets, etc, gurgling sounds in the plumbing, and sewage backing up into the house. When the system is pumped make sure all baffles and tees are in place and in working order. This will prevent solids from entering your drainfield.

Protect Your System

Don't plant anything but grass near your septic system and keep this area trimmed and cut. Roots from shrubs and trees can enter and clog drainfield pipes. Don't allow anyone to drive over any part of the system. Do not construct buildings or concrete over any part of the sewage system. Grass is the most appropriate cover for the drainfield

Myths and Folklore

There are a lot of myths about the best ways to startup a new septic system and to maintain an existing one. Some people believe that you should "seed" your septic tank to help start the bacteria growth. Some ideas on how to seed your tank include flushing a pound of yeast in the system, seeding your tank with manure, and even placing a dead cat inside the septic tank.

These measures might create bacteria growth within your tank, but are completely unnecessary. Yeast and manure will breed bacteria within your tank, but they will not do it any faster than the sewage you generate within your house. Wastewater created within your house will provide all the necessary bacteria to help your system function properly.

Another myth is that placing additives in your system can help renew your system's life span. Some of these additives even claim that they eliminate the need to pump out your tank. These products usually contain yeast, bacteria, or enzymes. However, there is little evidence showing that these additives are beneficial. First, there are materials inside your tank which cannot be broken down by any bacteria or enzymes. Some of these materials are organic while others are inorganic solids such as bits of plastic, sand, and grit. Secondly, the habitat within your tank is a very specialized one that is only fit for certain types of bacteria that have adapted specially to live in that environment. Any external bacteria that are introduced to your septic tank are more likely to be eaten than they are to eat. Enzymes, unlike bacteria, are not living organisms, and cannot reproduce. The number of enzymes you add to your tank is the number of enzymes that will remain in your tank. They will never increase in number. Because septic tanks are usually very large in volume, it would be very difficult to add enough enzymes to make a difference.

