

...continuing with important ways to protect your septic system:

3. Be careful what you flush or pour down the drain.

Think of your septic system as a collection of living organisms that digest and treat waste. The bacteria in a properly functioning tank can decompose up to 80% of the solids. Also keep in mind that many chemicals cannot be broken down and could end up in your drinking water! Don't clog your pipes, destroy the biological digestion taking place, or pollute groundwater — keep the following OUT of your septic system:

- Miscellaneous items (hair, lint, cat litter, cigarette butts)
- Personal care items (sanitary napkins, tampons, condoms, dental floss)
- Prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications
- Paper goods (baby wipes, bandages, paper towels, newspapers)
- Coffee grounds and eggshells
- All types of fat, grease, and oil
- Household chemicals (paint, varnish, solvents, antifreeze, drain cleaners, disinfectants, pesticides)



The use of kitchen garbage disposal units is not recommended. Even moderate use overburdens the system by increasing the accumulation of oils and solids in the tank, which means you may need to have the system pumped more frequently.

The use of well water softeners, septic tank additives, enzymes, and yeasts disrupt the biological process and tend to be more harmful than beneficial to the system.

4. Take care of your leachfield.

There are a number of precautions septic system owners can take to avoid costly problems with their leachfield, and to ensure the soil has the capacity to accept the wastewater:

- Know the location of your leachfield – keep vehicles, heavy equipment, livestock, and structures such as above ground swimming pools, storage sheds, and detached garages off the leachfield to prevent soil compaction and damage to pipes.
- Divert surface water runoff from roof drains, patios, driveways, hillsides, and other areas away from the leachfield – health hazards can occur when wastewater is not treated effectively because of saturated soil.
- Grass is the best cover for leachfields – it helps prevent soil erosion and helps remove excess water. Trees and shrubs should not be planted on or near the perimeter of the leachfield because their roots can damage the piping.

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A Guide to Septic System Maintenance

Protect your family's health and your home investment.

Understanding how your septic system operates and how to maintain it will help prevent septic system failure and groundwater contamination.

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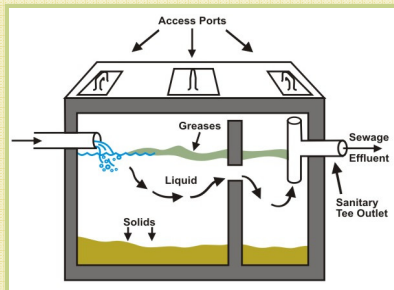


How do septic systems work?

Septic systems are designed to safely recycle wastewater back into the natural environment. Most septic systems have two main components – a septic tank and a leachfield (sometimes called a drainfield or absorption field). Many systems also have a distribution box between the tank and the field to distribute wastewater to all parts of the leachfield.

Wastewater enters the septic tank, where it is held about 3-7 days, long enough for the solids and liquids to separate, and for the bacteria to decompose some of the solids and contaminants.

Inside the tank, the wastewater forms three layers. Solids lighter than water (such as hair, grease, and soap) float to the top and form a *layer of scum*. Heavy solids settle to the bottom and form a *layer of sludge*. Wastewater in the middle is pushed out into the leachfield as more wastewater moves into the tank.



The leachfield is a network of perforated pipes, usually buried 1-3 feet deep, in gravel-lined trenches. The partially treated wastewater (*effluent*) trickles out of the leachfield pipes and into the soil, where more of the contaminants are removed by natural processes.

What are 4 important things you can do to protect your septic system?

1. Have your system inspected regularly—every 2 years is recommended—and have your tank pumped every 2-5 years.

Your septic system service provider should inspect the system's mechanical components, check for leaks, and measure the tank's sludge and scum levels. A word of caution: the treatment process produces toxic gases—when the tank's cover is removed never lean your head down into the opening!



Tanks should be pumped when the scum layer is 2" or more thick, or when the top of the sludge layer is within 12" of the bottom of the outlet tee. Keep a record of the sludge and scum levels as determined by your service provider, along with the date and what repairs, if any, were made – this will help you decide how often you need to have your system pumped.

If your plumbing fixtures back up, or water drains slowly or gurgles, even during periods of dry weather, your system could be failing. Sometimes just having the effluent outlet filter cleaned corrects the problem, but foul odors and lush, soggy areas appearing over your leachfield are typical signs of septic system failure. Immediately have your service provider inspect your system.

2. Conserve water to avoid overloading your septic system.

Efficient use of water can improve your system's operation and reduce its risk of failure. If too much wastewater enters the system, untreated wastes can get pushed into the leachfield prematurely, which can clog your system and create a health hazard, especially if the untreated wastewater flows to a drinking water source.

In a properly operating system, bacteria has adequate time to break down wastes and reduce pollutant levels before the wastewater reaches the leachfield, where it will eventually seep down into groundwater.

Three-quarters of the average household's water usage is from showers, toilets, and washing machines alone. Here are some economical water-saving tips to help you prolong the life of your septic system:

- Install high-efficiency showerheads and low-flow toilets.
- Run the dishwasher and washing machine only with full loads. Try to space the loads throughout the week, not all on one day.

- Small leaks and drips add up! Make sure faucets are completely turned off and that



there are no leaks in your plumbing. Don't let water run continuously while you shave, brush your teeth, wash vegetables, etc.