

# A Homeowner's Guide



to

# Septic Systems

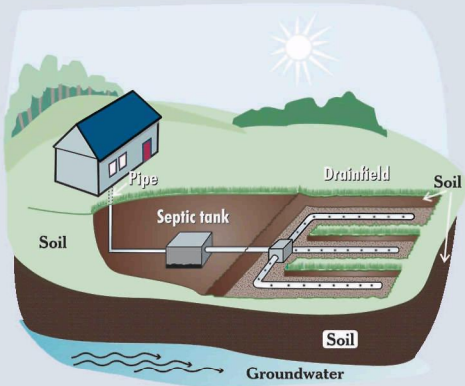


# Your septic system is your responsibility!

**D**id you know that as a homeowner you're responsible for maintaining your septic system? Did you know that maintaining your septic system protects your investment in your home? Did you know that you should periodically inspect your system and pump out your septic tank?



If properly designed, constructed, and maintained, your septic system can provide long-term, effective treatment of household wastewater. If your septic system isn't maintained, you might need to replace it, costing you thousands of dollars. A malfunctioning system can contaminate groundwater that might be a source of drinking water. And if you sell your home, your septic system must be in good working order.



## Protect Your Septic System

- 1 Inspect your system (every 3 years) and pump your tank as necessary (generally every 3 to 5 years).**
- 2 Use water efficiently.**
- 3 Don't dispose of household hazardous wastes in sinks or toilets.**
- 4 Care for your drainfield. Avoid driving or parking vehicles on your drainfield. Plant only grass over and near your drainfield to avoid damage from roots.**

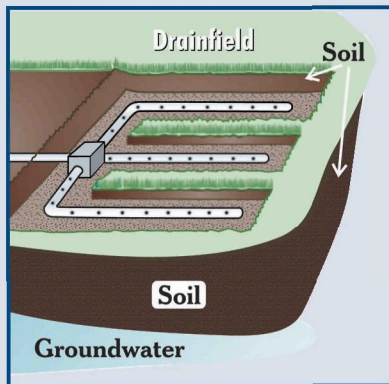
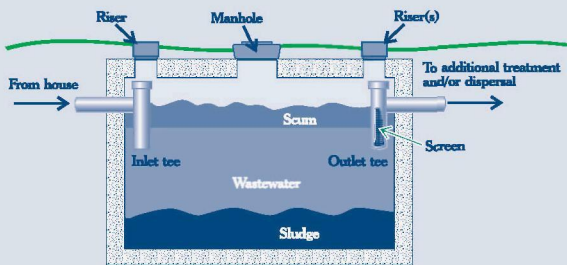
# How does it work?

A typical septic system has four main components: a pipe from the home, a septic tank, a drainfield, and the soil. Microbes in the soil digest or remove most contaminants from wastewater before it eventually reaches groundwater.

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 (forming sludge) and oil and grease to float to the surface (as 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 traveling into the drainfield area. Screens are also recommended to keep solids from entering the drainfield.

The wastewater exits the septic tank and is discharged into the drainfield for further treatment by the soil.

Microorganisms in the soil provide final treatment by removing harmful bacteria, viruses, and nutrients.



# How do I maintain my septic system?

## Pump frequently

You should have your septic system inspected at least every 3 years by a professional and your tank pumped as necessary (generally every 3 to 5 years).

## Use water efficiently

Average indoor water use in the typical single-family home is almost 70 gallons per person per day.

Dripping faucets can waste about 2,000 gallons of water each year. Leaky toilets can waste as much as 200 gallons each day. The more water a household conserves, the less water enters the septic system.

**Not in My  
Septic System!**

### **X Cloggers**

diapers, cat litter, cigarette filters, coffee grounds, grease, feminine hygiene products, etc.

### **X Killers**

household chemicals, gasoline, oil, pesticides, antifreeze, paint, etc.

## Flush responsibly

Dental floss, feminine hygiene products, condoms, diapers, cotton swabs, cigarette butts, coffee grounds, cat litter, paper towels, and other kitchen and bathroom items can clog and potentially damage septic system components. Flushing

household chemicals, gasoline, oil, pesticides, antifreeze, and paint can stress or destroy the biological treatment taking place in the system or might contaminate surface waters and groundwater.

## Use Water Efficiently!

- **Fill the bathtub with only as much water as you need**
- **Turn off faucets while shaving or brushing your teeth**
- **Run the dishwasher and clothes washer only when they're full**
- **Use toilets to flush sanitary waste only (not kitty litter, diapers, or other trash)**
- **Make sure all faucets are completely turned off when not in use**
- **Maintain your plumbing to eliminate leaks**
- **Install aerators in the faucets in your kitchen and bathroom**
- **Replace old dishwashers, toilets, and clothes washers with new, high-efficiency models**

**For more information on water conservation, please visit [www.epa.gov/owm/water-efficiency](http://www.epa.gov/owm/water-efficiency)**

# Why should I maintain my septic system?

A key reason to maintain your septic system is to save money! Failing septic systems are expensive to repair or replace, and poor maintenance is often the culprit. Having your septic system inspected (at least every 3 years) is a bargain when you consider the cost of replacing the entire system. Your system will need pumping every 3 to 5 years, depending on how many people live in the house and the size of the system. An unusable septic system or one in disrepair will lower your property's value and could pose a legal liability.

Other good reasons for safe treatment of sewage include preventing the spread of infection and disease and protecting water resources. Typical pollutants in household wastewater are nitrogen, phosphorus, and disease-causing bacteria and viruses. Nitrogen and phosphorus are aquatic plant nutrients that can cause unsightly algae blooms. Excessive nitrate-nitrogen in drinking water can cause pregnancy complications, as well as methemoglobinemia (also known as blue baby syndrome) in infancy. Pathogens can cause communicable diseases through direct or indirect body contact or ingestion of contaminated water or shellfish. If a septic system is working properly, it will effectively remove most of these pollutants.



## How to treat your drainfield

- **Plant only grass over and near your septic system. Roots from nearby trees or shrubs might clog and damage the drainfield.**
- **Don't drive or park vehicles on any part of your septic system. Doing so can compact the soil in your drainfield or damage the pipes, tank, or other septic system components.**
- **Keep roof drains, basement sump pump drains, and other rainwater or surface water drainage systems away from the drainfield. Flooding the drainfield with excessive water slows down or stops treatment processes and can cause plumbing fixtures to back up.**



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diapers, cat litter, cigarette  
filters, coffee grounds,  
grease, feminine hygiene  
products, etc.

**X Killers**

household chemicals,  
gasoline, oil, pesticides,  
antifreeze, paint, etc.

**For more information, contact your local health department  
or visit [www.epa.gov/owm/onsite](http://www.epa.gov/owm/onsite)**



**EPA**

**United States  
Environmental Protection  
Agency**

**832-B-02-006**

# Homeowner Septic System Checklist

## Septic System Description

Contact your local authority if you don't have this information.

Date system installed \_\_\_\_\_

Installer \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Tank size \_\_\_\_\_ gallons

Capacity \_\_\_\_\_ bedrooms

Type ☐ conventional  
☐ alternative (type) \_\_\_\_\_

## Things to keep in mind:

- ✓ Regularly inspect your system and pump your tank as necessary.
- ✓ Use water efficiently.
- ✓ Don't dispose of household hazardous wastes in sinks and toilets.
- ✓ Plant only grass over and near your septic system. Roots from nearby trees or shrubs might clog and damage the drainfield.
- ✓ Don't drive or park vehicles on any part of your septic system. Doing so can compact the soil in your drainfield or damage the pipes, tank, or other septic system components.

Not in My Septic System!



For more information about septic systems, contact:

Clean Water starts at Home

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency  
[www.epa.gov/owm/septic](http://www.epa.gov/owm/septic)

## Septic System Maintenance Record

Next Service	Scheduled Activity	Pumping Co./ Phone	Activities Completed	Comments
Jan. 2003	inspection	Joe Pumper 555-1234	inspection	sludge layer okay—may need pumping next year

Place on electrical box (fuse box) or other convenient location.