
Caring for your Septic System: A Reference Guide for Homeowners

Caring for Your Septic System

(Conventional Septic System, Innovative/Alternative (I/A) System, or Cesspool)

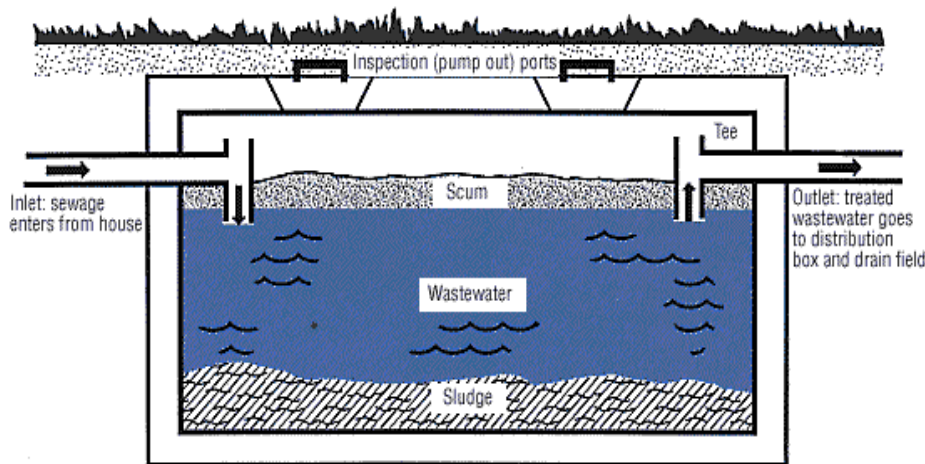
The accumulated solids in the bottom of the septic tank should be pumped out *every three years* to prolong the life of your system. Septic systems must be maintained regularly to stay working.

Neglect or abuse of your system can cause it to fail. Failing systems can

- cause a serious health threat to your family and neighbors,
- degrade the environment, especially lakes, streams and groundwater,
- reduce the value of your property,
- be very expensive to repair,
- and, put thousand of water supply users at risk if you live in a public water supply watershed and fail to maintain your system.

Be alert to these warning signs of a failing system:

- sewage surfacing over the drainfield (especially after storms),
- sewage back-ups in the house,
- lush, green growth over the drainfield,
- slow draining toilets or drains,
- sewage odors.



Tips to Avoid Trouble

DO have your tank pumped out and system inspected every 3 to 5 years by a licensed septic contractor (listed in the yellow pages).

DO keep a record of pumping, inspections, and other maintenance. Use the back page of this brochure to record maintenance dates.

DO practice water conservation. Repair dripping faucets and leaking toilets, run washing machines and dishwashers only when full, avoid long showers, and use water-saving features in faucets, shower heads and toilets.

DO learn the location of your septic system and drainfield. Keep a sketch of it handy for service visits. If your system has a flow diversion valve, learn its location, and turn it once a year. Flow diverters can add many years to the life of your system.

DO divert roof drains and surface water from driveways and hillsides away from the septic system. Keep sump pumps and house footing drains away from the septic system as well.

DO take leftover hazardous household chemicals to your approved hazardous waste collection center for disposal. Use bleach, disinfectants, and drain and toilet bowl cleaners sparingly and in accordance with product labels.

DON'T allow anyone to drive or park over any part of the system. The area over the drainfield should be left undisturbed with only a mowed grass cover. Roots from nearby trees or shrubs may clog and damage your drain lines.

DON'T make or allow repairs to your septic system without obtaining the required health department permit. Use professional licensed contractors when needed.

DON'T use commercial septic tank additives. These products usually do not help and some may hurt your system in the long run.

DON'T use your toilet as a trash can by dumping nondegradables down your toilet or drains. Also, don't poison your septic system and the groundwater by pouring harmful chemicals down the drain. They can kill the beneficial bacteria that treat your wastewater. Keep the following materials out of your system:

NONDEGRADABLES:

grease, disposable diapers, plastics, etc.

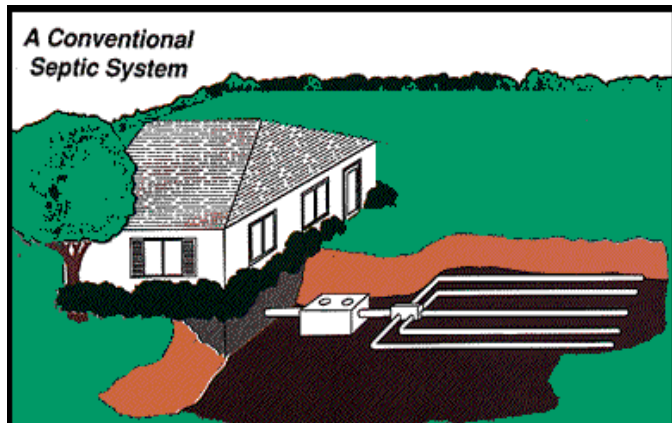
POISONS:

gasoline, oil, paint, paint thinner, pesticides, antifreeze, etc.

Septic System Explained

Septic systems are individual wastewater treatment systems (conventional septic systems, innovative/alternative (I/A) systems, or cesspools) that use the soil to treat small wastewater flows, usually from individual homes. They are typically used in rural or large lot settings where centralized wastewater treatment is impractical.

There are many types of septic systems in use today. While all systems are individually designed for each site, most systems are based on the same principles.



A Conventional Septic System

A conventional septic system consists of a septic tank, a distribution box and a drainfield, all connected by pipes, called conveyance lines.

Your septic system treats your household wastewater by temporarily holding it in the septic tank where heavy solids and lighter scum are allowed to separate from the wastewater. This

separation process is known as primary treatment. The solids stored in the tank are decomposed by bacteria and later removed, along with the lighter scum, by a professional septic tank pumper.

After partially treated wastewater leaves the tank, it flows into a distribution box, which separates this flow evenly into a network of drainfield trenches. Drainage holes at the bottom of each line allow the wastewater to drain into gravel trenches for temporary storage. This effluent then slowly seeps into the subsurface soil where it is further treated and purified (secondary treatment). A properly functioning septic system does not pollute the groundwater.

For More Information

A videotape version of this brochure, also entitled "Your Septic System: A Guide for Homeowners," is available through the EPA [Small Flows Clearinghouse](#). Call 1-800-624-8301.

For more information about maintenance or inspection of your septic system, contact [your local board of health](#).



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Wastewater and Onsite Systems

The National Small Flows Clearinghouse (NSFC) was funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to help America's small communities and individuals solve their wastewater problems through objective information about onsite wastewater collection and treatment systems. NSFC products and information are the only national resource of its type, dealing with small community wastewater infrastructure.

The National Onsite Demonstration Program (NODP) was formed to encourage the use of alternative, onsite and wastewater treatment technologies. The program helped to protect public health, ensure water quality, and sustain the environment in many small and rural communities. The NESC maintains much of NODP's information within its website and databases.

We Offer Technical Assistance

Do you have a technical question? We can help. Call us toll free at (800) 624-8301 ext. 3 or e-mail info@mail.nesc.wvu.edu.

Our Information

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Small Flows Magazine - This NESC publication features news, technical, and educational articles. Topics cover a variety of small community wastewater issues, including treatment technologies, regulations, and finance. Peer-reviewed research journal articles are occasionally included.

Pipeline Newsletter - This NESC publication is popular with small community officials, citizens, maintenance and inspection personnel, and community educators, as each quarterly issue focuses on a single wastewater topic and presents it in an easy-to-read format.

Newsletter and Journal Archives- The *Small Flows* newsletter and *Small Flows Journal* both feature a wide range of topics related to small community wastewater issues including: treatment technologies, design information, financial assistance, water quality, onsite and small community wastewater issues, and public education. These publications are out of print, but are available online.

Environmental Technology Initiative (ETI) Fact Sheets - As part of the ETI, the NSFC collected information from approximately 600 innovative wastewater technology projects and used it to create fact sheets designed to present information about suitable wastewater technology/practices for different situations.

Tools for Communities - Produced by the NODP, this series of products is designed to assist communities with addressing onsite and decentralized wastewater management issues.

Wastewater Listserv - Receive our wastewater news by e-mail.

Wastewater Regulatory Contacts (pdf) - Contacts are listed by state and updated quarterly.



Databases

Onsite Wastewater Regulations Database - This database helps customers access onsite wastewater regulatory documentation. It also helps the NESC determine if it is meeting the growing and changing needs of the regulatory community.

Bibliographic Database - This database stores thousands of articles dealing with onsite and small community wastewater collection, treatment, disposal, and related topics.

Manufacturers and Consultants Database - More than 1,200 entries include industry contacts for wastewater products and consulting services in this database.

Wastewater Regulatory Contacts (pdf) - Contacts are listed by state and updated quarterly.

Free Training Resources to Help You Protect Your Source Water



Survey Software powered by SurveyMethods.com used for NESC Customer Questionnaire.

The National Environmental Services Center | (800) 624-8301 | info@mail.nesc.wvu.edu

The NESC is a program of the **NRCCE** at **West Virginia University** and sponsored by the **Rural Development Rural Utilities Service**. West Virginia University is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Institution.

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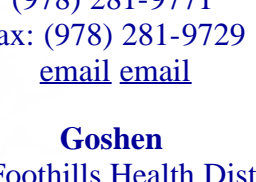
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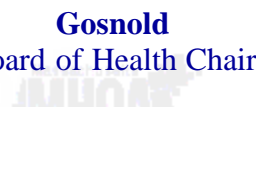
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