

Keep our waters clean Treat your septic system with care

Out of sight, out of mind. That's what many people think after the toilet flushes and the sink drains. But that wastewater may be seen again if the household's septic system fails. Some very simple measures can prevent septic system failure and protect Maine's lakes, streams and groundwater from pollution.

Most Septic systems, even with maintenance, will work effectively only for an average of 15-25 years.

Septic System Care

- A "starter" is not needed for bacterial action to begin in a septic tank. In fact, additives can sometimes do harm.
- Send all sewage into the septic tank. Don't run laundry waste directly into the drain field as soap or detergent scum will plug the soil pores.
- Normal amounts of household detergents, bleaches, or other household chemicals can be used and won't stop the bacterial action. Do not use excessive amounts.
- **Never** dump cleaning water for latex paint brushes or cans into the sewer.
- **Never** deposit coffee grounds, cooking fats, wet-strength towels, disposable diapers, facial tissues, feminine napkins, cigarette butts and other non-decomposable materials into the sewer. These materials **will not** decompose and will fill the septic system and could cause a failure. **Make sure to tell your house guests or renters of these limitations.**
- Do not dump grease down the drain. Throw it out with the garbage.
- If you have a septic system, it is not recommended that you use a garbage disposal. If you believe you must use one, you will likely need to have your septic tank pumped more frequently. Even with this, garbage disposals can still damage and shorten the life of a system
- If you use a water softener, call your professional septic system company for a brochure on use of such systems.
- Use a good quality toilet tissue that breaks up easily when wet. Put a hand full of toilet tissue in a fruit jar half full of water. Shake the jar and if the tissue breaks up easily, the product is suitable for the septic tank. High wet-strength tissues are not suitable.

Cleaning Your Septic Tank

- Pump your tank every 2-3 years for year-round residences and every 3-5 years for seasonal residences. Keep a written record.
- Summer/Seasonal usage – depends on how many people are using the residence. Even if you use your system briefly each year, it needs regular maintenance. However, excessive discharge on a daily basis into a septic system which is in excess of the systems ability to absorb the discharge can cause a system to fail even if you are there only during the summer. See "Tank Capacity" below.
- Get the tank pumped at the **beginning** of the season. The point is that if you get it pumped at the end of the season and are not using it year round, there may not be

enough water / sewage in the system when you leave and the water could freeze causing system damage.

- Keep vegetation cut down over top of the septic system/leach field. Vegetation, such as small trees and shrubs, can have deep root systems that can get into your septic drainage system and cause a septic field failure. A good septic field needs sunlight.
- Older septic systems will fail (pipe and stone systems). If you believe that your system is not performing the way it should or you have a septic smell, call a professional septic system company. They can dig test pits over the leach field to check if the system is working properly.

Tank Capacity

- Each septic system has a certain capacity. The leach field can only absorb a determined amount of liquid **each day**. Excessive discharge into the tank can cause the system to fail. Things that can be done to limit discharge are:
 - Low flow shower heads – highly recommended.
 - Fix leaking faucets and checking toilets for float valves that are leaking. A cup of water leaking out of a toilet can add up to 90 gallons a day!
 - A water meter can cost \$50 to \$100 plus installation. You can then determine how many gallons are going in to your system each day.
 - New front load washing machines use a fraction of water compared to an old top loader.
 - Spread out how often you do laundry. Do smaller loads several times a week rather than many loads on one day.
- Large number of house guest or renters can over stress a system. Advise your guests that you are on a septic system. Ask for their cooperation in limiting their shower time or frequency of showers, running dishwashers only when they are full, not letting water run continually in the sink when doing dishes and other common sense water limiting ideas.

Toilets - The largest discharge into the septic system usually comes from toilets (40%).

- The most effective way to reduce the sewage flow from a house is to reduce the toilet wastes. Some older toilets use 5 to 6 gallons per flush. Some “low flow” toilets use only 3.5 gallons per flush or less. However, low flow toilets many times take two flushes to get the sewage down. That’s 7 gallons. Toilets are now available which have been redesigned and will do a good job with one gallon or less per flush. This can reduce sewage flows from a home by one third. Ask an expert.
- Many Mainers are well aware of the old adage “If its yellow, let it mellow. If it’s brown, flush it down”. It is not very logical to use 3 to 5 gallons of water to flush down less than a pint of urine.

Following a few simple rules, like not using too much water and not depositing materials in the septic tank that bacteria can’t decompose, should help to make a septic system trouble-free for many years. But don’t forget, the septic system does need to be cleaned out when too many solids have built up. Septic systems need tender loving care too.