SEPTIC SYSTEM Maintenance

SEPTIC SYSTEM FAILURE

Anytime your septic system is not treating or disposing of sewage in an effective manner, the system is failing. There can be many reasons for system failure. By far, the most common reason for early failure is improper maintenance by homeowners. *Call your county health department or a licensed septic tank contractor if you suspect your system is failing.* Look for the following symptoms:

- ☒ Sewage backs up in your drains or toilets
- ☒ Slowly draining sinks, bathtubs and toilets
- ☒ Wastewater on the ground surface above and near the system
- ☒ Lush green grass over the drainfield, even during dry weather
- ☒ Unpleasant odors around your house
- ☒ Excessive growth of aquatic weeds or algae in surface waters adjacent to your home
- ☒ The presence of nitrates or bacteria in your drinking well test results

WHY MAINTAIN YOUR SEPTIC SYSTEM?

There are three important health reasons for maintaining your septic system.

- ☑ The first reason is the *health of your pocket book.* Poor maintenance results in failed systems requiring repairs at a minimum and sometimes system replacement. Repairs or replacement costs can be thousands of dollars, whereas a periodic inspection and pumping costs about $150-$250.
- ☑ The second reason is the *health of your family, your community and the environment.* Untreated sewage water contains disease-causing bacteria and viruses, as well as unhealthy amounts of nitrate and other chemicals. Failed septic systems can allow untreated sewage to seep into wells, groundwater, and surface water bodies, where people get their drinking water and recreate.
- ☑ The third reason is the *health of your economy.* Contamination of water bodies by failed septic systems pollutes water supplies, closes shellfish beds and recreational areas, and creates offensive odors. Quality of life, recreational opportunities, and tourism decline, and with them do the property values and economic vitality of the area.

HOW DO YOU MAINTAIN YOUR SEPTIC SYSTEM?

Proper care of your system requires day-to-day management as well as periodic maintenance. It also requires that you know where your system is located. The more you know about how your system operates and how it should be maintained, the better able you will be to protect your investment in your home and property, protect your family's health, and protect your environment.

Did you know... that a properly designed and installed septic system can be the safest, most economical way to treat your wastewater ***as long as it is properly maintained?***

DO NOT FLUSH...

coffee grinds	dental floss
disposable diapers	kitty litter
sanitary napkins	tampons
cigarette butts	condoms
fats, grease or oil	paper towels
paints	varnishes
thinners	waste oils
photographic solutions	pesticides

TAKING CARE OF YOUR SEPTIC SYSTEM

AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION IS WORTH A TON OF CURE! Committing a little attention to the care of your system can help to avoid the nightmare of a failing system. Assuming that your septic system was properly located, designed, and installed according to state codes, you are now in the driver's seat for the care of your system. By following the recommendations below, you can help your system to work properly for years to come.

DO's:

- ☑ Conserve water to reduce the amount of wastewater that must be treated and disposed of by your system. Doing laundry over several days will put less stress on your system.
- ☑ Repair any leaking faucets or toilets. To detect toilet leaks, add several drops of food dye to the toilet tank and see if dye ends up in the bowl.
- ☑ Divert down spouts and other surface water away from your drainfield. Excessive water keeps the soil from adequately cleansing the wastewater.
- ☑ Have your septic tank inspected yearly and pumped regularly by a licensed septic tank contractor.* *See the chart below for suggested pumping frequencies.*
- ☑ Keep your septic tank cover or lids accessible for inspections and pumpings. Install risers with lids if necessary.
- ☑ Call your county health department or a licensed septic tank contractor whenever you experience problems with your system, or if there are any signs of system failure.
- ☑ Keep a detailed record of repairs, pumpings, inspections, and other maintenance activities. Pass these on to the next homeowner.

PUMP SYSTEM REGULARLY

Suggested Pumping Frequency (Years)

Tank Size (gallons)	NUMBER OF PEOPLE USING THE SYSTEM				
	1	2	4	6	8
1000	12	6	3	2	1
1250	16	8	3	2	1
1500	19	9	4	3	2

Source: Adapted from "Estimated Septic Tank Pumping Frequency," by Karen Mancl, 1984. *Journal of Environmental Engineering.* Volume 110.

**** 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 will be needed.***

DON'Ts:

- ☒ Don't drive over your drainfield or compact the soil in any way.
- ☒ Don't dig in your drainfield or build anything over it, and don't cover it with a hard surface such as concrete or asphalt.
- ☒ Don't plant anything over or near the drainfield except grass. Roots from nearby trees and shrubs may clog and damage the drain lines.
- ☒ Don't use a garbage disposal, or at least limit its usage. Disposals increase solids loadings to your tank by about 50%, so you have to pump your tank more often than normally suggested.
- ☒ Don't use your toilet as a trash can or poison your system and the groundwater by pouring harmful chemicals and cleansers down the drain. Harsh chemicals can kill the bacteria that help purify your wastewater. *See the list on the front of this flyer.*
- ☒ Don't put in a separate pipe to carry wash waters to a side ditch or the woods. This graywater contains germs that can spread disease.
- ☒ Don't waste money on septic tank additives. The bacteria needed to treat wastewater is naturally present in sewage. Additives can re-suspend solids causing your drainfield to clog. Additives do not eliminate the need for routine pumping of your tank.
- ☒ Don't allow backwash from home water softeners to enter the septic system.
- ☒ Never enter a septic tank -- toxic gases from the tank can kill. If your system develops problems, get advice from your county health department or a licensed septic tank contractor.

CLEMSON UNIVERSITY

OFFICE OF OCEAN AND COASTAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT
South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control

This publication was developed cooperatively by the Clemson University Extension Service and the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control Office of Ocean & Coastal Resource Management. Material was adopted from similar publications by the National Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association, Cornell Cooperative Extension and the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service.
DHEC 5A-42 1/97