

How To Maintain Your Septic System

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Dear Dave: Do you have a Septic System 101 class that you could share with us who want to keep the Septic working as long as possible?

Answer: Yes, we can do that. This class is for those who have a traditional leach field system and not an Advantech system which is designed for lots with poor or unusable soil conditions. So, listen up.

Septic systems are a very simple way to treat household wastewater, and are easy to operate and maintain. Although homeowners must take a more active role in maintaining septic systems, once they learn how their systems work it is easy for them to appreciate the importance of a few sound operation and maintenance practices.

How Septic Systems Work: There are two main parts to the basic septic system: the septic tank and the drain field. Household wastewater first flows into the septic tank where it should stay for at least a day. In the tank, heavy solids in the wastewater settle to the bottom, forming a layer of sludge, and grease and light solids float to the top forming a layer of scum.

How to Care for Your System: Septic system maintenance is like automobile maintenance because a little effort on a regular basis can save a lot of money later and significantly prolong the life of the system. Sound septic system operation and maintenance practices include conserving water, being careful that nothing harmful is disposed of through the system, and having the system inspected annually and pumped regularly.

Use Water Wisely: Water conservation is very important for septic systems because continual saturation of the soil in the drain field can affect the quality of the soil and its ability to naturally remove toxins, bacteria, viruses, and other pollutants from the wastewater.

In a typical household, most of the water used indoors is used in the bathroom, and there are a lot of little things that can be done to conserve water there. For example, try to avoid letting water run while washing hands and brushing teeth. Avoid taking long showers, and install water-saving features in faucets and shower heads. These devices can reduce water used by up to 50 percent. Low-flush toilets use one to two gallons per flush compared to the three to five gallons used by conventional toilets.

Know What Not to Flush: What you put into your septic system greatly affects its job. As a general rule of thumb, do not dispose of anything in your septic system that can just as easily be put in the trash. Remember that your system is not designed to be a garbage disposal, and that solids build up in the septic tank and eventually need to be pumped out.

In the kitchen, avoid washing food scraps, coffee grounds and other food items down the drain. Grease and cooking oils contribute to the layer of scum in the tank and also should not be put down the drain. Garbage disposals can increase the amount of solids in the tank up to 50 percent and are not normally installed in a home with a septic system.

The same common-sense approach used in the kitchen should be used in the bathroom. Don't use the toilet to dispose of plastics, paper towels, tampons, disposable diapers, condoms, kitty litter etc. The only things that should be flushed down the toilet are wastewater and toilet paper.

Avoid Hazardous Chemicals: To avoid disrupting or permanently damaging your septic system, do not use it to dispose of hazardous household chemicals. Even small amounts of paints, varnishes, thinners, waste oil, photographic solutions, pesticides and other organic chemicals can destroy helpful bacteria and the biological digestion taking place within your system. These chemicals also pollute the groundwater.

Pump Your Tank Regularly: 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 drain field, this could clog and strain the system to the point where a new drain field will be needed. Pumping at least once a year is recommended, preferably in the Fall.

Inspect your System Annually: Inspecting your septic system annually is a good way to monitor your system's health. Inspections can reveal problems before they become serious, and by checking the levels of sludge and scum in your tank, you can get a more accurate idea of how often it should be pumped.

Conclusion: Depending on your soil conditions, your septic system in Alaska should last 30 years with good maintenance. In Anchorage, Municipal authorities will require the system to be tested for adequacy upon the sale of your property. At that time, good maintenance could save you \$20,000 or more for a new installation.