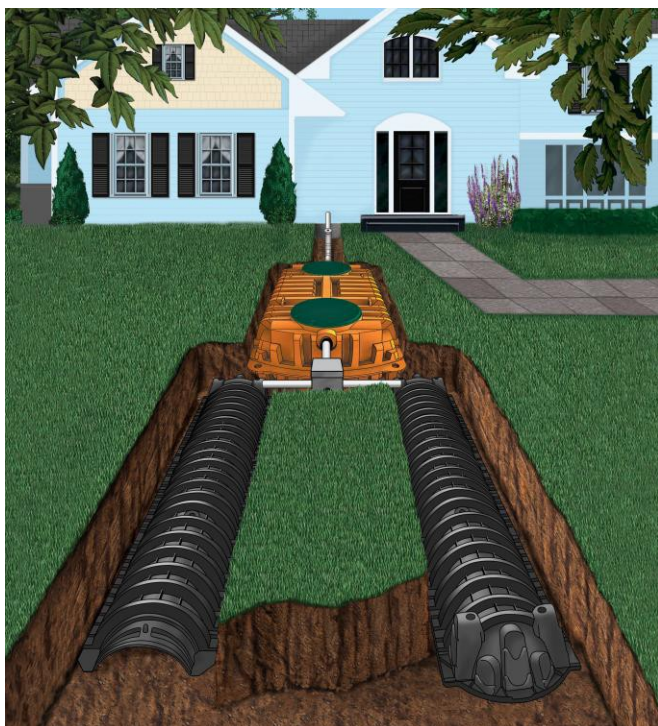




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# TAKING CARE OF YOUR SEPTIC SYSTEM

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH  
DIVISION OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

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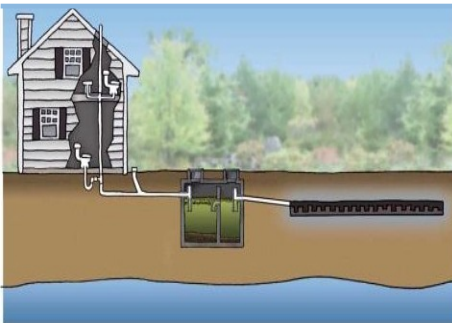
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*Reading this brochure could save you a lot of money, time, and trouble. By learning how to take care of your septic system, you can protect your family's health and the value of your home. You can also protect the environment, including your drinking water, from contamination caused by your septic system.*

## **What Is A Septic System?**

A septic system is made up of a septic tank and a leachline or seepage pit (dispersal soil absorption area) buried in the ground near your home. This system treats wastewater and sewage from your toilets, showers, washing machines, garbage disposals, kitchens, etc., where public sewer systems are not available.



The septic tank is a concrete, fiberglass, Polyethylene or steel box about nine feet long and five feet deep and wide. The tank is usually buried about five feet from the house under one to three feet of soil. The leachline is a gravel-filled underground

trench, whereas a seepage pit is a vertical hole in the ground with a concrete block lid and walls that are covered with soil. The pit measures 4-6 feet in diameter and 15-40 feet deep.

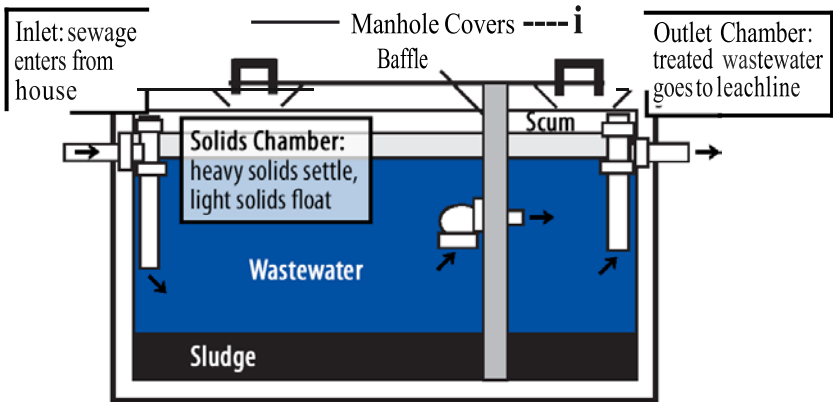
## **What Does A Septic System Do?**

A septic tank has three main functions to:

- 1) Remove and treat greases and solids in the wastewater;
- 2) Store greases and solids until they are removed by a professional septic tank pumper; and
- 3) Slowly release wastewater to a dispersal system so it can be absorbed by the soil.

Wastewater from your home flows into a two-chamber septic tank. In the first solids chamber, greases and light solids in the water rise to the surface of the liquid, forming a scum layer, while heavier materials sink to the bottom and form a sludge layer. Anaerobic bacteria digest (break down) solids in the sludge layer to reduce sludge buildup. The third layer is the clarified wastewater which flows to the second liquids chamber where further settling occurs.

### Typical Concrete Septic Tank



The treated wastewater flows from the liquid chamber to the dispersal soil absorption area, where it seeps down into the soil. Bacteria trapped in the soils continue treating the wastewater. Every time raw sewage flows into the tank, an equal amount of treated wastewater flows out.

### What Could Go Wrong?

#### Septic Tank Failure

Ignoring your septic system could cost you thousands of dollars for repair or replacement. If your tank is not pumped regularly, scum and sludge will fill up the tank, overflow into the dispersal

area and plug up the soil. This causes the leachline to fail and the wastewater to rise to the surface of the ground. Failure of a leachline means a new leachline or seepage pit must be constructed with a permit from the County or City Building and Safety Department.

Other factors can also cause septic system failure. Wasting water, or even too many people living in the house, can cause a septic system to fail. Your septic system was designed according to the number of bedrooms in the home with an average of two people per bedroom. Because the soil can only absorb a limited amount of water, conserving water can help you stay under the daily limit.

This chart shows how much wastewater your tank can process in a 24-hour period:

Bedrooms	Estimated Gallons of Wastewater per Day	Septic Tank Capacity in Gallons
1-2	500	750
3	670	1000
4	800	1200
5-6	1000	1500

Water draining into the leachline from gutters, or even heavy rains, can overload the system and cause it to fail.

### Health Hazard



Failure of a septic system is a serious health hazard and could threaten the health of your family and neighbors. Children and adults could come in contact with raw (untreated) sewage. Pets, insects, rodents, and birds could pick up and carry disease causing organisms to you and your family. Furthermore, it usually stinks.

## Water Contamination

The first sign of failure is sewage where you don't want it, such as:

- Sewage running into the tub when you flush the toilet
- Sewage rising to the surface of the ground above the leachline, especially after storms
- Slow draining toilets/drains or toilets that won't flush
- Gurgling sounds in pipes and drains
- Mushy ground or lush, green grass near septic system area
- Strong sewage odors and possible complaints from your neighbors

## What Can I Do? Important Ways to Keep Your Septic System Running Well

**Do have your tank pumped by a County-licensed septic tank pumper every two to four years.**

Have both compartments pumped.

To see if your tank needs to be pumped, remove the manhole cover at the inlet end (the end

closest to the house). Use a shovel to push the scum layer away from the side of the tank to estimate its thickness. If the scum layer is more than one foot thick, have your tank pumped immediately! Replace the manhole cover and wash your hands and shovel. Yearly inspection of the septic tank is strongly recommended. Check your phone book yellow pages for a licensed Septic Tank Pumper. If your tank does not have risers to grade, install them over both chambers.



**Do keep a record of all pumpings, inspections, installations and other maintenance.** Keep this brochure and use the back page to record this information. This record should remain in the

house, even if you move. If you buy a house with a septic system, make sure you get a record and layout from the owner. They are responsible for keeping the records.

**Do call your City or County Building and Safety Department if your system fails within five years of the installation date.**

This could mean your system was not designed, constructed or installed properly. DEHS does not have final plans on what was installed.

**Do find out where your septic tank and leachline are.** Your licensed pumper can help you draw a sketch of the septic system layout, including the location of the manholes, tank, piping and leachline. Remember, pumping your tank or installing a new leachline will cost more if the pumpers or contractors have to dig and search for the tank or leachline. Also, install an effluent filter on the outlet line to prevent solids from plugging the soil.

**Do conserve water.** Repair dripping faucets and leaking toilets. Avoid taking long showers and use water saving toilets, shower heads and faucets. Don't leave faucets running for long periods of time. Use your dishwasher or clothes washer only when the machine has a full load. Using your garbage disposal will also fill up your septic tank much faster.



**Do use bleach, disinfectants, and drain/toilet bowl cleaners sparingly and according to labels.** Take your leftover household hazardous chemicals to a Household Hazardous Waste Collection Center. For more information on household hazardous waste disposal call (909) 382-5401.

**Do reserve additional land equal to or larger than your present septic system area for future use.** This is needed when the original system fails. Do not build over the existing system or expansion area.

## Tips to Avoid Trouble

**Do Not wait until your septic system fails to have your tank pumped.** It is cheaper and easier to prevent system failure than to correct a failed system or to install a new system. Remember, once the leachline is clogged, cleaning the tank will do little good. You will need a new leaching area.

**Do Not waste money on chemical, yeast, bacteria or enzyme additives.** These products have been evaluated by the EPA and it has been determined that they usually don't prevent problems. These products could hurt your system in the long run, or even contaminate groundwater. Only regular tank pumpings by professional licensed septic tank pumpers can help.

**Do Not destroy an old, failed leachline.** It may be used again by letting the old leachline dry out, or rest, for three to five years. DEHS recommends installing a diversion valve when your new leachline is built



to change the flow of wastewater from the new line to the old line. After the three to five year waiting period, you can release the wastewater to the new line on even-numbered years and to the old line on odd-numbered years. If you let a leaching area rest every other year and have your septic tank pumped regularly, the leachline(s) should last the life of your home or building.

**Do Not allow anyone to drive, park or pave over any part of the system.** Traffic vibration or heavy weight could damage pipes and your seepage pits. The area over the leachline should be left undisturbed with only a mowed grass cover. Keep trees and shrubs away from your septic system area. Their roots could clog or damage your leachline(s).



**Do Not use your toilet and sink as a trash can to dump non- degradable (things that do not dissolve).** Keep things like vegetable trimmings, cooking oils, greases, coffee grounds, cigarette butts, Kleenex, paper towels, disposable diapers, and sanitary pads out of your septic tank. Use good quality white toilet paper that breaks up easily when wet. Dyes from colored toilet paper can hurt the bacteria.

**Do Not contaminate the groundwater or harm your septic system by pouring harmful chemicals down the drain or toilet.** Large amounts of cleaning products can kill the good bacteria in your septic tank that treat wastewater. Read the instructions on the labels and use only as directed.

### **KEEP THESE MATERIALS OUT OF YOUR SEPTIC SYSTEMS!**



**Non-degradable:** grease, paper towels, plastics, coffee grounds, cigarette butts, disposable diapers, etc.

**Hazardous Waste:** paints and paint thinners, used motor oil, pesticides, antifreeze, weed killers, etc.

## WHERE IS MY SEPTIC SYSTEM?

One method to locate a septic tank is by probing with a metal rod or by listening to the noise a plumber's snake makes when it contacts the tank inlet. Care must be utilized during the probing as it may damage the inlet fitting or piping.

Another method is by making a water probe with  $W'$  X 6' galvanized water pipe or PVC, threaded on one end. Purchase a pipe-to-hose fitting or use duct tape as a temporary fitting. Turn the water on and sink the probe into the ground. The water will do the digging. Set up a grid pattern and probe every 1 to 2 feet until the tank is found. The top of the septic tank is usually 2 to 4 feet beneath the surface. Legally, septic tanks can be no closer than 5 feet from the house so begin probing 6 to 7 feet from the house. Typically, the septic tank is in the front yard but the system might be in the rear yard or even under a patio slab.

**SAVE THESE IMPORTANT SEPTIC SYSTEM RECORDS!**

SEPTIC TANK ADDRESS:

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SEPTIC TANK  
Installation Date/Size (gallons)

CONTRACTOR  
Name/Phone Number

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**SEPTICTANK/SEEPAGE PIT PUMPING**

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**LEACHLINES/SEEPAGE PIT**  
Installation Dates/Length, Width, Depth of Rock

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