

What is a septic system?

A septic system is an on-site wastewater treatment system for your home. It processes and purifies household waste (effluent). The effluent consists of blackwater (toilet wastes) and graywater (kitchen sink, bathtub and laundry wastes).

A septic system has two components: a septic tank and a leachfield or a drainfield. Primary treatment occurs in the septic tank, where bacteria digest organic materials in the wastewater. The effluent then flows into the drainfield for secondary treatment. Here, bacteria complete the digestion and purification process as the wastewater slowly leaches into the soil.

How often should I pump my septic tank?

The septic tank is a watertight underground box, usually concrete, about 8 feet long, four feet wide and five feet deep. It usually has at least a 1,000 gallon capacity. As wastewater flows into the tank, heavy solids settle to the bottom into a sludge layer, while grease fats float to the top forming a layer of scum. About 95% of the sludge and scum that is in your septic tank is broken down by bacteria. The other 5% remains in the tank and builds up in the sludge layer. **Every 3-4 years you should have the septic tank pumped.** This will ensure that the solids in the tank won't build up and wash out into the drainfield and clog it up. Pumping the tank after the solids have clogged the drainfield will not restore the system.

Tips for a Healthy Septic System

- 1. Conserve water.** Large volumes of water over a short period of time will flush untreated solids out of the septic tank and into the drainfield.
 - Space out heavy water-using activities such as laundry and taking showers.
 - Repair leaky faucets and valves.
- 2. Keep your drains clean.** Remember that a septic system uses natural biological processes, so only wastes that are biodegradable should go into it.
 - No cigarette butts, tissues, sanitary napkins, disposable diapers, cat box litter, coffee grounds or cotton swabs. If it isn't biodegradable it doesn't belong in the system.
 - No paints, oils, chemical drain cleaners, poisons or pesticides.
 - No grease or cooking oils.
 - Go easy with the garbage disposal.
- 3. Don't waste money** on additives that claim to boost the bacteria count or extend septic system life. Bacteria are already present in the billions and additives won't affect the need for periodic pumping.