

GET PUMPED! LONG ISLAND

Home Wastewater System Owner's Guide: Fact Sheet #3

TAKING CARE OF YOUR SYSTEM

Your home wastewater system represents a significant financial investment which you will want to protect. With proper operation and regular maintenance, your system will function better, last longer, improve the environment, and save you thousands of dollars.

Do not wait until your system shows signs of failure to have your septic tank or cesspool inspected and pumped out. Waiting can mean an expensive repair bill, or worse – having to replace your system. Periodic pumping of your system is far less costly than repair or replacement of the entire system.

While your tank is being pumped, ask the septic professional to examine the inlet and outlet baffles or tees in your system (see diagram on Typical Home Wastewater Systems fact sheet). If either is broken, have repairs done immediately. The inlet should also be checked to see if wastewater is continuously flowing into the tank from previously undetected plumbing leaks. The outlet baffle is more important than the inlet baffle. Its loss will allow untreated material to go directly to the absorption area; failure of the system is a common result. See *Fact Sheet #4 entitled "Maintenance and Inspection"* for more of what to expect and what questions to ask.

IMPORTANT SAFETY TIPS

- **CALL 811 BEFORE YOU DIG!** Make sure there are no buried utility cables or sprinklers or electric lines.
- When working with septic systems, do so carefully and safely. Sewage contains germs that can cause diseases. **Never enter a septic tank or cesspool.** Toxic and explosive gases in the tank or cesspool present a hazard. Old or damaged tanks or cesspools can collapse. Secure the septic tank or cesspool lids so children cannot open them.
- If damaged, it is important that the system be repaired as soon as possible to minimize the health risk to your family and community.

SIGNS OF POSSIBLE HOME WASTEWATER SYSTEM PROBLEMS

- Slowly draining fixtures; particularly after it has rained.
- The smell of sewage accompanied by extremely soggy soil near your wastewater system.
- Sewage discharged over the ground or in nearby ditches or woods.
- Sewage backing up into toilets, tubs, or sinks.
- Lush vegetation near your system



For more information please visit: www.GetPumpedLI.org

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MAINTENANCE “DOs” and DON’Ts”

DOs:

- Do have your system pumped regularly and checked for leaks and cracks. Generally, tanks should be pumped and inspected every three to five years. A proper inspection and record of two pump-outs will give you an accurate guide as to how often your system should be pumped in future. Keep a schedule and record of past and future inspections and pumping (see fact sheet record keeping folder).
- Do conserve water to reduce the amount of wastewater that must be treated and disposed of. Fix leaky faucets and toilets immediately. Water conservation will extend the life of your system and improve its ability to provide needed treatment.
- Do space out your washing machine loads and other large water uses (dishwashers, showers, etc.).
- Do only discharge biodegradable wastes into the system.
- Do keep deep-rooted trees and bushes away from the leaching system.
- Do maintain natural shape of the land immediately downslope of the system and protect this area from cutting and filling.
- Do be sure that water from the roof, gutters, and foundation drains do not flow over or into the system.
- Do keep your septic tank cover accessible for tank inspections and pumping. Don't cover the septic tank or cesspool with asphalt or concrete. Many homeowners install a concrete riser on the access ports, if they are buried six inches or deeper, to provide easy access for inspections and pumping.
- Do call a septic professional when you have problems.

DON'Ts:

- Don't flush cigarette butts, cotton swabs, cat box litter, “flushable wipes” (even ones advertised as septic safe), sanitary napkins, tampons, disposable diapers, condoms, and other non-biodegradable products into your system. They can easily fill up your system and require more frequent pump-outs, damage your system, and lead to backups in your home.
- Don't poison your system by dumping solvents, oils, paints, thinners, disinfectants, pesticides, or poisons down the drain which can kill helpful bacteria and can contaminate groundwater.
- Don't use commercial tank additives (chemicals or enzymes) as they are not necessary and some can harm our local waterways. The bacteria needed for partially decomposing wastewater solids are naturally present in the wastewater and in your system. Even if you use additives that are safe, you will still need to pump the solids out of your tank on a regular basis.
- Don't flush unwanted medications down the toilet. Bring them to a collection program.
- Don't use a garbage disposal. Waste from garbage disposals will fill your system more rapidly, requiring more frequent pumping.
- Don't drive over your septic system or otherwise compact the soil over your septic system in any way.
- Don't install anything over your septic system except grass.
- Don't empty large quantities of water into or over your system from items such as hot tubs or whirlpools, particularly if they are chlorinated.
- Don't pour oils, greases, or coffee grounds down the sink.
- Don't wait for signs of failure or attempt to repair a failing system yourself. Hire an experienced septic professional. A repair permit may be needed from your local municipality.