

# Septic System Do's and Don'ts

How you treat your septic system greatly affects its ability to do its job. Educating everyone in your household about what is and is not good for your septic system can help you save money and headaches, prolong the life of your system, safeguard the health of your family, protect your property value and care for the environment.

## INSTALLATION

### DO

- Use professional licensed contractors to design and install your system.
- Know that if you are planning an addition that adds more than 15 per cent to your home's floor area, increases the number of bedrooms, or increases the number of plumbing fixtures, you may need to enlarge your septic system.

### DON'T

- Do not expand the size of your residence, add a basement suite, or start a business (e.g. day care) without adjusting the size of your septic system.
- Do not attempt to install or repair your septic system without the involvement of a qualified onsite wastewater management professional.
- Do not make or allow repairs to your septic system without obtaining any required permits.

## IN YOUR HOME

### DO

- Compost kitchen wastes instead of using a garburator.
- Scrape dishes into the garbage instead of the sink.
- Use a drain catcher to stop food bits from going down the drain.
- Install water-saving toilets or install toilet dam devices to reduce water use per flush and reduce the number of times you flush your toilet with multiple uses before flushing.
- Install water-saving faucets and shower heads.
- Fix all leaking faucets and toilets immediately.
- Take shorter showers.
- Run washing machines and dishwashers only with full loads, and select the proper load size for your machine.
- Wash only one or two loads of laundry a day.

### DON'T

- Do not put cigarette butts, paper towels, sanitary tampons, condoms, disposable diapers, plastics or similar non-biodegradable materials into your septic system.
- Avoid washing food scraps, coffee grinds, and other food items down the drain.
- Never put oil, gasoline, paint thinners, solvents, pesticides, pharmaceuticals or other toxic chemicals down the drain.

## MAINTENANCE

### DO

- Know the location of your septic tank and soils treatment component. Keep a sketch of it handy with your system maintenance records.
- Have your system inspected by a professional every year.
- Have your tank pumped out by a professional every 12-36 months.
- Remove sludge in spring rather than fall to avoid loading the tank with undigested solids during cold months.
- Always leave a small amount of sludge to renew the bacterial activity.
- Keep your septic tank cover accessible for inspections and pumping. Install risers if necessary and always keep the tank lid secure.
- Call a professional whenever you experience problems with your system, or if there are any signs of system failure.
- Keep detailed records of repairs, pumping, inspections, permits issued, and other maintenance activities.

### DON'T

- Do not enter or access a septic tank.
- Do not use septic tank additives.
- Do not disinfect, scrub and wash the tank.

## IN YOUR YARD

### DO

- Watch for any ground settlement that might direct water onto the soils treatment component.
- Keep the area around the septic system grassed to promote evaporation and avoid erosion.

### DON'T

- Do not allow vehicles to drive over the soils treatment component area or park on it.
- Do not plant any trees or shrubs on or near the bed; their roots can clog pipes.
- Do not drain downspouts, sump pumps, etc. down the septic system.
- Do not alter drainage features without consideration for impacts to the dispersal field.
- Do not build over the soils treatment component or cover it with a hard surface such as asphalt, brick or patio stones.
- Do not excessively water the lawn over the soils treatment component area.
- Do not install automatic lawn sprinklers in the area.

# Septic System FAQs

If you have a septic system you most likely have questions about it. Here are the answers to some of the most commonly asked questions about septic systems. Remember, the proper operation of your septic system is essential to public and private health, to property values and to the environment.

## How do I know who is qualified to design, build or repair a septic system?

Wastewater practitioners authorized to construct septic systems in Alberta are certified by the Alberta Onsite Wastewater Management Association (AOWMA) and have a PSDS ticket issued by the Province of Alberta. Professional engineers working in the onsite wastewater industry in Alberta are certified by the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Alberta (APEGA).

## Who is qualified to pump out septic tanks?

Vacuum truck operators, also called haulers or pumpers, who list themselves as sewage haulers.

## How often should I have my septic tank pumped out?

Have your tank pumped out every 12 to 36 months unless advised differently by your maintenance provider.

## What is graywater?

Graywater is untreated household waste water which has not come into contact with toilet waste. Graywater includes used water from bathtubs, showers, bathroom wash basins, and water from clothes washing machines and laundry tubs. It does not include waste water from kitchen sinks, dishwashers or laundry water from soiled diapers. In the western provinces, graywater must be collected by the septic system where it goes through the same treatment and dispersal process as blackwater.

## How long should a septic system last?

A conventional septic system should last anywhere from 20-25 years, or even longer, if it is properly installed and maintained with regular pump-outs every 12 to 36 months.

## What are some common signs that my septic system may be failing?

You smell sewage odours indoors or outdoors. There is water (sewage) surfacing in your yard (often above your soils treatment component). The soils treatment component area is frequently wet and spongy. Sewage is backing up into your house. There is a change in plant growth and algae (excessive growth) in nearby ponds and lakes. Well water tests show increased levels of nitrates and the presence of coliform bacteria.

## How can I make sure my septic system lasts a long time?

The most important things you can do are to regularly maintain and pump out your septic tank. Have the tank periodically cleaned and inspected. Have your soils treatment component (dispersal area) inspected annually. Make sure that you do not put anything down your drains that will make it more difficult for your system to do its job. Paints, oils, fats, garbage and harmful chemicals should be avoided since they kill the “good bacteria” that break down the solid waste in your septic system.

For more information about the Septic Sense program and workshops in your community visit [www.aowma.com](http://www.aowma.com) or call 1.877.489.7471.

