

On-Site Sewage System Information

A “conventional” on-site sewage system has three working parts.

- **The septic tank.** Wastewater from your toilet, bath, kitchen, laundry, etc. flows into the tank. Heavy solids settle to the bottom where bacterial action partially decomposes them to digested sludge and gases. Most of the lighter solids, such as fats and grease, rise to the top and form a scum layer.
- **The drainfield.** The drainfield receives septic tank effluent. It has a network of perforated pipes laid in gravel-filled trenches or bed in the soil. Wastewater trickles out of the pipes, through the gravel layer, and into the soil. The size and type of drainfield depends on the estimated daily wastewater flow and soil conditions. Every new drainfield must have a designated replacement area. The replacement area must be maintained for when the existing system needs an addition or repair.
- **The soil.** The soil below the drainfield provides the final treatment and disposal of the septic tank effluent. The soil filters effluent as it passes through the pore spaces. Chemical and biological processes treat the effluent before it reaches groundwater, or a restrictive layer, such as hardpan, bedrock or clay soils.

Caring For Your System – The Ten Essentials

1. **Practice water conservation.** The more wastewater you produce, the more the soil must treat and dispose. By reducing and balancing your use, you can extend the life of the drainfield, decrease the possibility of system failure, and avoid costly repairs.
2. **Keep accurate records.** Know where your septic tank system is and keep a diagram of the location. Records of its size and location may be available at Okanogan County Public Health.
3. **Inspect your system once each year.** Check the sludge and scum levels inside your septic tank to assure that the bottom of the scum layer is not within 3 inches of the bottom of the outlet tee or baffle of the first compartment and that the top of the sludge layer is not within 12 inches of the bottom of the outlet fitting of the first compartment. The tank also should be checked to see if the baffles or tees are in good condition. Periodically inspect the drainfield and downslope areas for odors, wet spots, surfacing sewage or lush vegetation. If your drainfield has inspection pipes, check them to see if there is a liquid level continually over 6 inches. This may be an early indication of a problem.
4. **Pump out your septic tank when needed.** Don't wait until you have a problem. Routine pumping (which is recommended every 3-5 years) can prevent failures, such as clogging of the drainfield and sewage back-up into the home. Using a garbage disposal will increase the amount of solids entering the septic tank and require more frequent pumping.
5. **Never flush harmful materials into the septic tank.** Grease, cooking fats, newspaper, paper towels, rags, coffee grounds, sanitary napkins, and cigarettes cannot easily decompose in the tank. Chemicals such as solvents, oils, paint and pesticides are harmful to the system's proper operation and may pollute the groundwater. Septic tank additives do not improve the performance of the septic tank, nor do they reduce the need for pumping.
6. **Keep all runoff away from your system.** Water from surfaces such as roofs, driveways, or patios should be diverted away from the septic tank and drainfield area. Soil over your system should be slightly mounded to help surface water runoff.
7. **Protect your system from damage.** Keep traffic, such as vehicles, heavy equipment, or livestock off your drainfield or replacement area. The pressure can compact the soil or damage pipes.
8. **Landscape your system properly.** Don't place impermeable materials or buildings over your drainfield or replacement area. Grass is the best cover for your system.
9. **Never enter any septic tank.** Poisonous gases or the lack of oxygen can be fatal. Any work to the tank should be done from the outside.
10. **Call Okanogan County Public Health if you have any questions about your on-site sewage system. Our telephone number is 509-422-7140.**