

# How to Care for Your Septic System



Septic system maintenance is not complicated, and it does not need to be expensive. Upkeep comes down to four key elements:

- [Inspect and Pump Frequently](#)
- [Use Water Efficiently](#)
- [Properly Dispose of Waste](#)
- [Maintain Your Drainfield](#)

For more about septic system maintenance, see answers to [frequent questions on caring for septic systems](#).

## Inspect and Pump Frequently

The average household septic system should be inspected at least every three years by a septic service professional. Household septic tanks are typically pumped every three to five years. Alternative systems with electrical float switches, pumps, or mechanical components should be inspected more often, generally once a year. A service contract is important since alternative systems have mechanized parts.

These are the major factors that influence how often to pump your septic system:

- Household size
- Total wastewater generated
- Volume of solids in wastewater
- Septic tank size

## Here is what you need to know for a service provider

When you call a septic service provider, he or she will inspect for leaks and examine the scum and sludge layers in your septic tank.

Keep the maintenance records on work performed on your septic system. See the [National Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association's Guide and Record Keeping Folder example](#) [Exit](#) [Exit EPA website](#) [Exit](#) [Exit EPA website](#).

Your septic tank includes a T-shaped outlet which prevents sludge and scum from leaving the tank and traveling into the drainfield area. Your tank should be pumped if the bottom of the scum layer is within six inches of the bottom of the outlet, if the top of the sludge layer is within 12 inches of the outlet, or if more than 25% of the liquid depth is sludge and scum.

To keep track of when to pump out your tank, write down the sludge and scum levels found by the septic professional.

The service provider should note repairs completed and the tank condition in your system's service report. If other repairs are recommended, hire a repair person soon.

The National Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association (NOWRA) has a [directory of septic system professionals](#) [Exit](#) [Exit EPA website](#) [Exit](#) [Exit EPA website](#) that makes it easy to find service professionals in your area.

## Use Water Efficiently

The average indoor water use in a typical single-family home can be as much as 70 gallons per individual, per day. Just a single leaky or running toilet can add as much as 200 gallons of water per day.

All the water a household sends down its pipes ends up in its septic system. The more water a household conserves, the less water enters the septic system. Efficient water use improves the operation of a septic system and reduces the risk of malfunctions.

[EPA's WaterSense program](#) has many simple ways to save water and water-efficient products.

- **High-efficiency toilets.**

Toilet use accounts for 25 to 30 percent of household water use. Many older homes have toilets with 3.5- to 5-gallon reservoirs, while newer, high-efficiency toilets use 1.6 gallons of water or less per flush. Replacing existing toilets with high-efficiency models is an easy way to reduce the amount of household water entering your septic system.

- **Faucet aerators and high-efficiency showerheads.**

Faucet aerators, high-efficiency showerheads, and shower flow restrictors help reduce water use and the volume of water entering your septic system.

- **Washing machines.**

Washing small loads of laundry on your washing machine's large-load cycle wastes water and energy. By selecting the proper load size, you will reduce water waste. If you are unable to select a load size, run only full loads of laundry.

Try to spread washing machine use throughout the week. Doing all household laundry in one day might seem like a time-saver but it can harm your septic system. It will not allow your septic tank enough time to treat waste and could flood your drainfield.

Clothes washers that bear the [ENERGY STAR](#) label use 35 percent less energy and 50 percent less water than standard models. Other Energy Star appliances provide significant energy and water savings.

## Properly Dispose of Waste

Whether you flush it down the toilet, grind it in the garbage disposal, or pour it down the sink, shower, or bath, everything that goes down your drain ends up in your septic system. What goes down the drain affects how well your septic system works.

### Toilets aren't trash cans!

Your septic system is not a trash can. An easy rule of thumb is not to flush anything besides human waste and toilet paper. Never flush:

- Cooking grease or oil
- Non-flushable wipes, such as baby wipes or other wet wipes
- Photographic solutions
- Feminine hygiene products
- Condoms
- Dental floss
- Diapers
- Cigarette butts
- Coffee grounds
- Cat litter
- Paper towels
- Pharmaceuticals
- Household chemicals like gasoline, oil, pesticides, antifreeze, and paint or paint thinners

### Think at the sink!

Your septic system contains a collection of living organisms that digest and treat household waste. Pouring toxins down your drain can kill these organisms and harm your septic system. Whether you are at the kitchen sink, bathtub, or utility sink:

- Avoid chemical drain openers for a clogged drain. Instead, use boiling water or a drain snake.
- Never pour cooking oil or grease down the drain.
- Never pour oil-based paints, solvents, or large volumes of toxic cleaners down the drain. Even latex paint waste should be minimized.
- Eliminate or limit the use of a garbage disposal. This will significantly reduce the amount of fats, grease, and solids that enter your septic tank and could clog the drainfield.

# Maintain Your Drainfield

Your drainfield—a component of your septic system that removes contaminants from the liquid that emerges from your septic tank—is an important part of your septic system. Here are a few things you should do to maintain it:

- **Parking:** Do not park or drive on your drainfield.
- **Planting:** Plant trees the appropriate distance from your drainfield to keep roots from growing into your septic system. A septic service professional can advise you of the proper distance, depending on your septic tank and landscape.
- **Placing:** Keep roof drains, sump pumps, and other rainwater drainage systems away from your drainfield area. Excess water slows down or stops the wastewater treatment process.

## Frequent Questions on Caring for Septic Systems

- **Should I be careful of what I pour down the drain?**
  - Yes. Many materials that might be poured down the drain do not easily decompose. This can be harmful to the healthy bacteria that grow in your septic tank and drainfield to help break down organic matter. Do not pour grease (such as fats, butter, wax, cheese, heavy cream), liquid wastes (such as pesticides, drain cleaners, household chemicals, paints, paint thinners), oils or coffee grounds down the drain. If you have a garbage disposal, limit its use because food waste can add an unnecessary amount of solid material to your septic tank. Harmful chemicals put down your drain can also be discharged into the groundwater and can impact drinking water supplies and the environment. EPA's Quick Tip Video explains which items to put or not put down the drain, ["Think at the Sink!"Exit Exit EPA websiteExit Exit EPA website](#)
- **Does using a garbage disposal unit impact my septic system?**
  - Yes. Using an in-sink garbage disposal unit can impact how often you need to pump your septic tank. Food waste usually is slowly digested by the healthy bacteria in your septic tank and can accumulate as scum and sludge. If a large amount of water enters the septic tank or the tank fills up with solids, it can push the solids into the drainfield, causing the pipes to clog and increasing the thickness of the biomat (a bacteria layer that forms on the bottom and sides of the drainfield trenches). If you must use a garbage disposal unit, your tank will need to be pumped more frequently.
- **What can I flush down the toilet?**
  - Only flush human waste and toilet paper down the toilet.
  - Never flush these items down the toilet because they could clog your septic system and cause a failure:
    - Cooking grease or oil
    - Non-flushable wipes, such as baby wipes or other wet wipes
    - Photographic solutions
    - Feminine hygiene products
    - Condoms
    - Dental floss
    - Diapers
    - Cigarette butts
    - Coffee grounds
    - Cat litter
    - Paper towels
    - Pharmaceuticals

- Household chemicals like gasoline, oil, pesticides, antifreeze, and paint or paint thinners
- EPA's Quick Tip Video explains which items not to put down the toilet, "[Don't Overload the Commode!](#)"[Exit Exit EPA websiteExit Exit EPA website](#)
- **Should I avoid driving or building on my drainfield?**
  - Yes. Most drainfields (such as rock and pipe, chamber system, etc.) are constructed in open lawn areas and are not designed to handle vehicles or heavy equipment driving on them. The weight of vehicles and heavy equipment compacts the soil, which can damage pipes. Impermeable materials, such as concrete and asphalt, should not be laid on top of a drainfield because they reduce evaporation and the supply of oxygen to the soil. Oxygen is critical to the healthy bacteria in your septic system and the proper breakdown of sewage by soil microorganisms.
  - Do not build any structures in or on your drainfield area without checking with a local designer or permitting authority. It is not recommended to plant trees, shrubs, or vegetable gardens on the drainfield. Tree and shrub roots can ensnarl and damage drainfield pipes. Vegetables can potentially be exposed to sewage effluent and unsafe to consume. Native grasses and ground covers are the most appropriate planting over your drainfield. See EPA's [Proper Landscaping On and Around Your Septic System](#) factsheet or [WaterSense's What to Plant](#) for more information.
  - EPA's Quick Tip Video explains how to safeguard your drainfield, "[Shield Your Field!](#)"[Exit Exit EPA websiteExit](#)