SEPTIC TANK MAINTENANCE

How Does A Septic Tank Work?

The septic tank removes solids by holding wastewater in the tank, which allows the solids to settle and scum to rise to the top. Incoming water should be held in the tank for at least 24 hours in order to improve settling. Up to 50 percent of the solids will decompose into liquids and gases. The remaining solids accumulate in the tank.

Biological and chemical additives are not needed to aid or accelerate settling or decomposition. As a general rule, no solids other than human wastes and white toilet paper should be flushed.

As the septic system is used, sludge continues to accumulate in the bottom of the septic tank. Properly designed tanks have enough capacity for three to eight years use before needing service. The tank should be checked each year starting with the third year to determine how much sludge is there. It is important to understand that septic tanks always appear full because both the inlet and the outlet are at the top of the tank. The homeowner needs to determine how much of the tanks volume is being taken up by solids, scum and sludge. When sludge and scum take up more than 35 percent of the tank volume, these solids need to be removed by pumping.

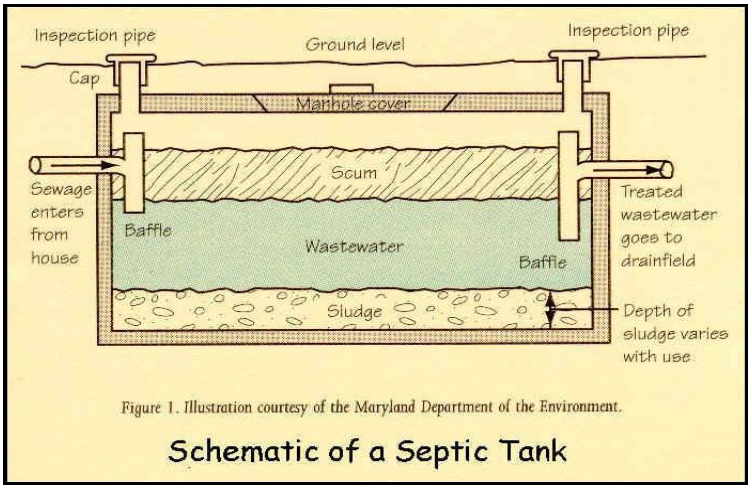

Figure 1. Illustration courtesy of the Maryland Department of the Environment.

Schematic of a Septic Tank

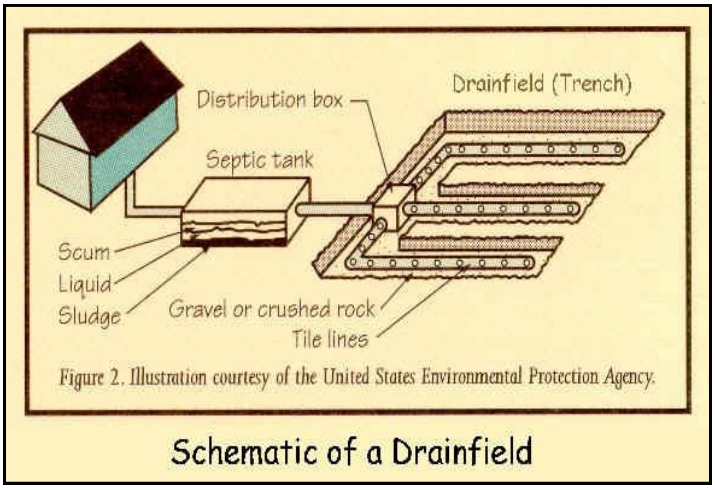

Figure 2. Illustration courtesy of the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

Schematic of a Drainfield

Servicing A Septic Tank

When too much sludge and scum are allowed to accumulate, the incoming sewage will not have enough time in the septic tank for solids to settle. Solids may flow to the drain field and clog the drain field, causing the sewage to over-flow to the ground surface, where it exposes humans and animals to the disease-causing organisms in sewage. To prevent this from happening, it is very important to check the tank and have it serviced when needed.

The drain field may not fail immediately when a full tank is not pumped. However, the septic tank is no longer protect-ing the drain field from solids. This creates inefficiencies in the drain field and may allow contamination of the ground-water. Continued neglect will result in failure of the drain field, and it may need to be replaced.

Cleaning The Tank

The frequency of pumping depends on the size of the tank and what and how much goes down your drains. Use of a garbage disposal and excessive water use can increase pumping frequency.

In Oregon, a 1,000 gallon septic tank is used for homes with up to four bedrooms. If four people live in a four-bedroom house, a 1,000 gallon tank may need to be pumped approximately every three years. If the same system serves a family of two, the tank would be ready for pumping every six years. Systems installed before current rules and regulations may have smaller septic tanks and may need to be pumped more often.

A properly constructed and maintained system can last a long time if you follow some common Septic System **DO's** and **DON'Ts**:

DON'T flush material that will not easily decompose, such as hair, diaper, cigarette butts, matches, or feminine hygiene products.

DON'T wash or flush medicines or hazardous chemicals like paint, paint thinner and bleach into the system. They kill the bacteria needed to decompose wastes in the septic tank and drain field.

DON'T drive over the septic tank or drain field.

DON'T plant anything over or near the drain field except grass. Roots from nearby trees or shrubs may clog and damage drain lines.

DON'T dig in your drain field or build anything over it.

DON'T make or allow repairs to your septic system without obtaining the required permit. Use professionally licensed septic contractors when needed.

DON'T use septic tank additives. These products usually do not help and some may even be harmful to your system.

DON'T allow back wash from home water softeners to enter the septic system.

DON'T enter your tank, any work to the tank should be done from outside. Gases that can be generated in the tank and/or oxygen depletion can be fatal.

DO conserve water to avoid overloading the system

DO use substitutes for household hazardous waste.

DO learn the location of your septic tank and drain field. Keep a sketch of it handy with your maintenance record for service visits.

DO cover the drain field with a grass cover to prevent erosion and remove excess water.

DO keep your septic tank cover accessible for inspections and pumping. Install risers if necessary.

DO keep a detailed record of repairs, pumping, inspection, permits issued, and other maintenance activities.

DO divert other sources of water, like roof drains, house footing drains, and sump pumps, away from the septic system. Excessive water keeps the soil in the drain field from naturally cleansing the wastewater.

DO have your septic tank pumped out regularly by a DEQ licensed contractor.

DO call a professional whenever you experience problems with your system, or if there are any signs of system failure.

Signs of Septic System Failure:

- Pools of water or soggy spots, foul odors, and/or dark gray or black soils in the area of your drain field.
- Water that surfaces over the drain field during heavy rain or when doing laundry.
- Sewage backs up into the lowest drains in the house.
- Gurgling of drains, slow drainage (check for clogs first).
- Soggy soil overlying the drain field.

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