

Septic System Do's and Don'ts

A large number of the tribal homes in the area have an on-site sewage treatment system, or septic system. These systems are not out-of-site, out-of-mind, and they need to be properly maintained or problems can arise and systems can fail. People can get sick with stomach or intestinal infections, giardia (a parasite), staph infections, infectious hepatitis, or typhoid fever from contact with waste water on the ground or in polluted drinking water. Therefore, it is important to keep systems running smoothly. This can be done by following a few simple "Do's and Don'ts" of septic systems:

1. **Do** have the septic tank pumped every 2-3 years.
2. **Do** limit water entering the tank (use water saving fixtures, minimize amount of water used for bathing and washing both clothes and dishes).
3. **Don't** plant trees or shrubs on or near the system. Their roots may enter the fields and clog them.
4. **Don't** allow motor vehicles to drive over any part of your underground system. The underground pipes could be crushed or broken, which could stop the operation of the system.
5. **Don't** use chemicals to clean or "sweeten" your system.
6. **Don't** overuse a kitchen garbage disposal unit. Heavy use adds large quantities of solids and shortens the time between pumpings.
7. **Don't** put harmful materials in the tank. Avoid fats, solvents, oils, disinfectants, paints, chemicals, pesticides, kitty litter, poisons, coffee grounds, paper towels, cigarette butts, disposable diapers, sanitary napkins and tampons.
8. **Don't** place impermeable materials over your drainfield. Materials such as concrete or plastic reduce evaporation and the supply of oxygen to the soil for proper effluent treatment. They can also hinder access to the system for pumping, inspection, or repair.
9. **Don't** fertilize the soil above a drainfield.
10. **Don't** stockpile snow or soil on your drain field.
11. **Don't** allow downspouts (roof drains) to drain onto or into your drainfield.
12. **Don't** use septic tank additives. These products won't help and may even be harmful to your system and the groundwater.

Following these steps will help ensure trouble-free operation for many years. For a free brochure on septic system care and maintenance, call National Small Flows Clearinghouse at 1-800-624-8301. Call Doug or Steve at IHS Environmental Health (384-3621) if you have any questions.

Source: Michigan State University Extension, Maryland Dept. of Health, National Small Flows Clearinghouse

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