

Troubleshooting for On-Site Sewage Management Systems

Is Your Septic Healthy?

Your septic may need attention if any of these conditions occur:

- The air around it smells – usually like rotten eggs.
- The ground is damp or soggy, or pools form downhill.
- There's lots of dark green grass growing on or around the disposal area.
- The toilet or drains are slow to clear, or keep backing up.
- There are lots of weeds growing downhill from the disposal area, in nearby drainage channels or on the banks of nearby waterway.
- The septic tank has not been checked for over 12 months.
- The septic tank has not been pumped out (de-sludged) in the past 5-7 years.

Call a licensed plumber or pump-out contractor.

Do It Yourself Check-Up

1. Carefully open the inspection cover (and then stand clear for a while to avoid exposure to dangerous gases). Check the fluid level near the outlet. Use a torch if necessary. Fluid should be no higher than the outlet pipe at the wall of the tank (there should only be floating scum above this level).
2. If you have an effluent filter, check it is working. If it is clogged, rinse it clean with a hose so the drainage goes back into the septic tank. If it doesn't clean up, replace the filter cartridge (wear gloves).
3. If you have absorption trenches, check the area carefully. It should not be soggy, should not smell and should not have prolific grass growth. Grass should be kept well mown and clippings removed. If it's soggy, smells or is overgrown with dense grass, there may be too much water flowing into your septic, or the trenches may be exhausted. Call a licensed plumber.
4. Check all drains and toilets in the house are working properly. If drains and toilet are allowed to empty, the pipes may be blocked or the septic

system may be full or the trenches may be clogged or exhausted. Call a licensed plumber.

DON'T FORGET YOUR SAFETY, septic tanks are hazardous:

- Be aware of flammable and toxic gases and ensure the site is well ventilated.
- Approach the opening only after the lid is left open for a little while.
- Never smoke or use naked flame near the open septic tank.
- Ask a second person to watch you.
- Wear gloves and remember to wash hands immediately after checking.

Commons Problems Identified

- Too much water going into the system causes effluent to flow too quickly through the septic tank before bacteria have a chance to work. Solids can be pushed through the system, clogging absorption trenches;
- Too much sludge and scum in the tank. Not having a tank de-sludged regularly will result in the tank failing and untreated wastewater with heaving solids flowing out of the tank in the absorption trench; and
- Toxic chemicals going into the system like solvents, oils, paints, disinfectant, pesticides, household cleaning products and bleaches that kill the helpful bacteria in the septic system. This stops the digestion of effluent and pollution of the absorption trenches.

Preventing Problems

Do:

- Learn how your sewage system works and its operational and maintenance requirements;
- Learn the location and layout of your septic system and disposal area;
- Have your septic tank de-sludged every 5-7 years to prevent sludge build-up, which may clog pipes and transpiration beds/trenches;
- Conserve water! Conserving water around the house will reduce the amount of wastewater needing to be treated. This will result in less

frequent de-sludging and longer life of your system;

- Check household products for suitability for use in septic systems; and
- Engage a contractor to regularly check and service your system;
- Keep a record of servicing's, inspections and other maintenance.

Don't:

- Put large quantities of bleaches, disinfectants, whiteners, nappy soakers and spot removers into your septic system – they kill off the helpful bacteria that digest the waste;
- Allow any foreign materials such as nappies, tampons, condoms and other hygiene products to enter the system – they cause blockages and expensive servicing and repairs;
- Use more than the recommended amounts of detergents;
- Put fats and oils down the drain – they clog the system and cause blockages;
- Install or use 'sinkers' – instead dispose or compost of your fruit and vegetable scraps separately; and
- Let children or pets play on the disposal area where they could be exposed to harmful bacteria.

Even with a good treatment system, the wastewater that leaves your septic tank has high levels of bacteria and you should avoid exposure as much as possible.

More information

Visit Council's website at

www.federationcouncil.nsw.gov.au. Alternatively, contact Council on (02) 6033 8999 and ask to speak to the Environmental Health Officer (EHO).