5. Household Practices

Many household chemicals can harm the helpful bacteria in your septic system. Without these important bacteria, the system may malfunction. Chemicals do not decompose easily and can contaminate the groundwater once in the drainfield.

**DO NOT POUR DOWN THE DRAIN...**

- Paints
- Solvents
- Acids
- Drain cleaners
- Oils
- Bleaches (in large quantities)

Reducing the amount of wastewater generated can extend the life of your septic system. Less water in the septic tank provides more storage area for the raw wastes. A larger, less full tank means that the soil will have a better chance to decompose the wastes.

Some water conservation methods include:
- Installing low-flow toilets
- Taking shorter showers
- Replacing leaky faucets and toilets immediately

6. Signs of Trouble

Some warning signs that a septic system is not working properly include:
- Foul odors in your home or yard
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- Ponds that drain slowly because of a clog in the house, pipes, septic system, or drainfield

If the odor problem is persistent, ask the homeowner for a copy of any maps and/or records that he/she may have regarding the septic system.

**DO NOT FLUSH...**

- Diapers
- Baby wipes
- Sanitary napkins
- Tampons
- Condoms
- Cigarette butts
- Nylons
- Coffee grounds

These materials do not decompose in the septic tank and will clog the system.

Try to limit the use of your garbage disposal. It can add extra material to the septic system that takes a long time to decompose. Try composting your food waste instead.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Call your Local Cooperative Extension Service offices. Also, check our websites www.ces.uga.edu/housing

This publication incorporates information from the National Home*A*Syst Program. Environmental Risk-Assessment Guide for the home, Second Ed., Anthony Tyson, editor, publication number 1152-4; and EPA Office of Water, publication number WQL22, September 2000; Improving Household Wastewater Treatment, Anthony Tyson, author, bulletin number WH-547.

**Warning:**

Do not flush chemicals such as:

- Bleach
- Acids
- Drain cleaners
- Oils
- Fukes (in large quantities)

**DO NOT INSTALL LOW-FLOW FIXTURES OR FITTINGS...**

- Fixtures that drain slowly because of a clog in the house, pipes, septic system, or drainfield
- Fixtures that drain slowly because of a clog in the drainfield
- Fixtures that drain slowly because of a clog in the septic system

Contact a professional to address the problem.

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If you need to expand or modify the septic system, keep in mind that the soil will have a better chance to decompose the wastes.

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**Importance Of Maintenance**

Maintaining your septic system protects your investment, drinking water, and nearby streams. Pumping the septic system every 3 to 5 years will prevent the system from overflowing. If a septic tank overflows, the wastewater will mix with solid waste in the tank and could clog the drainfield causing sinks and toilets to “back up.” Also, the raw waste may flow into drinking water wells or runoff into streams that lead to the ocean and estuaries. Raw waste in coastal waters may contaminate shellfish and result in waters that are not fit to swim in.

**Risk Assessment** This table will help you determine your risk for unexpected costly repairs on your septic system and actions that may pollute your drinking water.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ISSUE</th>
<th>LOW RISK</th>
<th>MEDIUM RISK</th>
<th>HIGH RISK</th>
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<td>Septic System Location &amp; Maintenance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tank Size</td>
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<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Septic Tank Capacity</td>
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<td>Recommended Years Between Septic Tank Pumping</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>3.7</td>
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<td>9.1</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
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</table>

**Here’s What You Can Do:**

1. **Septic System Location**
   - To keep wastewater in the drainfield and prevent it from contaminating water, a drainfield should be 100 feet from any water wells or runoff into streams that lead to the ocean and estuaries. Raw waste in coastal waters may contaminate shellfish and result in waters that are not fit to swim in.

2. **Septic Tank Capacity**
   - Each day, you use about 75 gallons of wastewater. Septic tanks should be large enough to hold two days of wastewater in the drainfield on the heaviest use days. Use the chart below to determine if your tank is the right size.

3. **Septic Tank Maintenance and Pumping**
   - Septic systems must be kept clean and well maintained to avoid costly repairs on the system and actions that may pollute your drinking water.

   **TABLE 1**

4. **Drainfield Maintenance**
   - The weight of vehicles or heavy equipment can damage a drainfield if driven or parked on top of the system. These vehicles compact the soil and prevent water from flowing away from the drainfield. Trees and shrubs closer than 50 feet to the drainfield will not cause damage. Water flowing from trees needs to be diverted away from the drainfield. Hoses can be attached to the downspout to direct the water to another part of the lawn (not the drainfield). Prevent runoff from flooding puddles near the system.