

Why Should I Maintain My Septic System?

Did you know that septic systems are the responsibility of you the homeowner? It is up to you to keep your system working properly to protect your environment, your health and your investment.

When properly designed, constructed and maintained, a septic system should provide long-term, effective treatment of your household wastewater. If you take good care of your system, you will save yourself the time, money and worries involved in

replacing a failed system. Failed systems can be hazardous to your health, the environment and your pocketbook. It can degrade water supplies and reduce your property value. Below are some valuable tips to ensure the longevity of your system.

A licensed sewage hauler or onsite sewage system professional should remove the septic tank cover and inspect the system every three to five years and pump out the solids and scum when required.

Do:



- familiarize yourself with the location of your system
- keep the tank access lid secured to the riser at all times
- keep an as built system diagram in a safe place for reference
- keep accurate records of septic system maintenance and service calls
- test your well water at least three times a year — spring, summer and fall — for indicator bacteria
- have your tank inspected for sludge and scum buildup on a regular basis (3-5 years) and clean out when a third of the depth of your tank is full of sludge and scum
- have your effluent filter checked and cleaned every year; if you don't have an effluent filter, consider adding one
- divert surface water away from your leaching bed
- conserve water in the house to reduce the amount of wastewater that must be treated
- repair leaky plumbing fixtures
- replace inefficient toilets with low-flush models
- consider installing a lint filter on your washing machine's discharge pipe
- spread the number of loads of laundry throughout the week

Don't:



- enter a tank — gases and lack of oxygen can be fatal
- put cooking oils or food waste down the drain
- flush hazardous chemicals, pharmaceuticals, cigarette butts or sanitary products
- use a garbage disposal unit/garburator unless your system has been designed for it
- use special additives that are claimed to enhance the performance of your tank or system — you don't need them!
- dig without knowing the location of your leaching bed
- drive or park over your tank or leaching bed
- pave over your leaching bed
- allow livestock on the leaching bed
- plant trees or shrubs too close to the septic tank or leaching bed
- connect rain gutters, storm drains, sump pumps or allow surface water to drain into a septic system
- connect leaching bed or greywater system to agricultural field drainage
- discharge water softener backwash to the septic system unless your system has been designed for it
- drain hot tub and spa water to the septic system

Ask To See The License!

Anyone in the business of pumping and cleaning septic tanks must be licensed by the Ontario Ministry of the Environment.

Anyone who installs, repairs or services septic tanks must be licensed by the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

What Happens When There's A Problem?

Septic systems have a lifespan of approximately 15-40 years. To maximize the lifespan of your system, follow the "Do and Don't" list on page 8.

A malfunctioning septic system is easy to see . . . and smell. If you suspect you have a problem with your septic system, it is important to fix the problem quickly. A malfunctioning septic system is a risk to your environment and your health. It can quickly contaminate groundwater and surface water used as drinking water sources.

If failure occurs shortly after construction, it may be the result of poor site assessment, poor design, poor construction practices or homeowner abuse.

If you think there's a problem, start by having the septic system inspected. The tank may just need a cleaning. However, if there is a problem with the leaching bed, you will want to speak to an onsite sewage system professional for their advice. Onsite sewage system professionals include installers, professional engineers, certified engineering technologists and registered sewage system designers. A second opinion is always recommended.

If a homeowner has a malfunctioning septic system, the big question is, "Do I have to replace the whole system?" Repairs can range from cleaning a few lines to replacing entire leaching beds and removing contaminated and clogged soils. An onsite sewage system professional should be retained. Their first task will be to determine the cause of the failure.

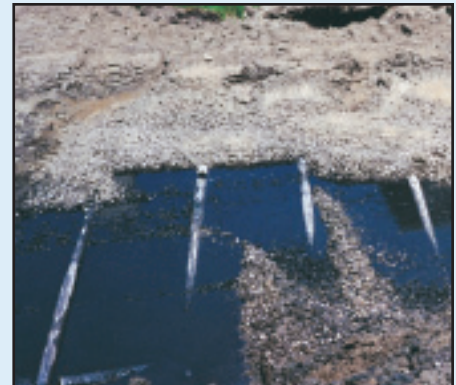
If repairs are required to correct your septic system problem, contact your local regulatory agency to obtain the appropriate permit before proceeding. The local regulatory agency varies from municipality to municipality. Local grant programs may also exist to help you with repair costs.



Scum level is too high. Time to pump your tank and inspect your leaching bed.



Effluent pond on top of the leaching bed.



A failed system exposed.

New Technology

Alternative technology for treating wastewater for individual homes has been around since the 1970s but uptake has been slow. Only in the late 1990s did new technologies become more readily available thereby providing more choices for homeowners.

Sometimes alternative technology may be the only option. Conventional systems sometimes don't work on smaller lots, waterfront properties or when replacing systems in a confined area.

Alternative technologies may be required to reduce certain contaminants (e.g., nitrate) if your property is located in a vulnerable groundwater or surface water area as identified

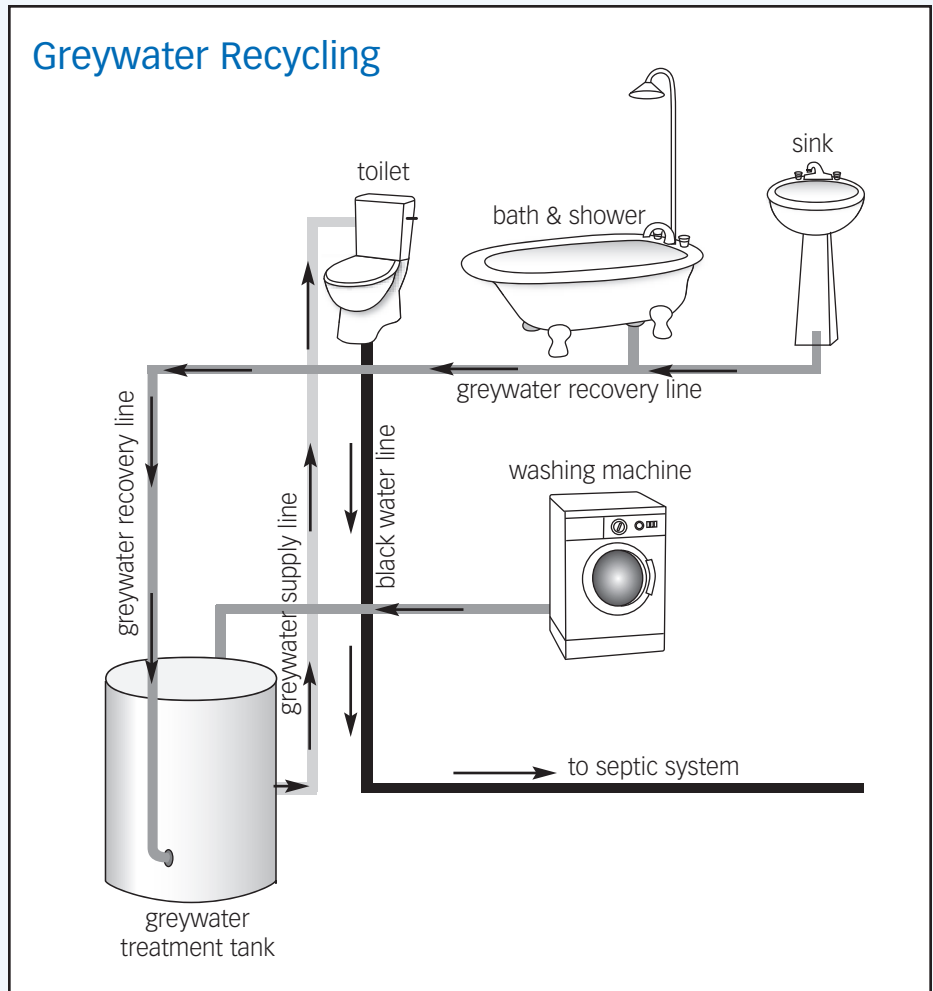
through local source water protection studies. Contact your local conservation authority or municipality to learn about any programs for cost sharing opportunities, technology upgrades or replacements.

The research and development of alternative technologies have made it possible to produce an effluent of the same quality or even better than some large municipal treatment plants. Homeowners should not be afraid to consider new approved technology such as Aerobic Treatment Units (ATUs) and Media Filters. Your local onsite sewage system professional can help you select the right technology for your site.

Water Conservation

Water conservation is always a good thing. When it comes to your septic system, the more a household conserves, the less water enters the septic system. Efficient water use can improve the bacterial action of the septic system and reduce the risk of failure.

- Check for leaky taps and leaking toilets. Each small drip adds up.
- Replace your inefficient toilets with a low-flush, high-efficiency or a dual flush toilet (up to a 50 percent reduction in water use).
- Use faucet aerators and high-efficiency showerheads to reduce water use (up to a 30 percent reduction in water use).
- Take short showers instead of baths.
- Consider purchasing a high-efficiency washing machine (up to a 50 percent reduction in water and energy use).
- Wash full loads of laundry or use the appropriate water level or load size selection.
- Consider water-efficient models when replacing your dishwasher (up to a 40 percent reduction in water use).



If you have recurring potable water shortages and are building a new home, you may want to consider recycling your greywater. Greywater recycling collects wastewater from the bath, shower, dishwasher and washing machine. It is treated and reused for toilet flushing. Greywater is not to be used for drinking water or bathing. It requires disinfection to prevent fouling the system.

Your local onsite sewage system professional can help guide you on greywater systems suitable for your new home construction.

Other Information Sources:

- Municipal Building Department
- Local Health Unit
- Local Conservation Authority
- Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing
- Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
- Ontario Ministry of the Environment
- Ontario Rural Wastewater Centre
- Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation
- Ontario Onsite Wastewater Association
- Ontario Association of Sewage Industry Services



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Technical writing by:

- Terry K. Davidson — Rideau Valley Conservation Authority

Plain language editing by:

- Diane Downey — Rideau Valley Conservation Authority

Design and illustration by:

- Laurie Dool — Rideau Valley Conservation Authority

Technical Review Committee Members:

- Andrew Graham — Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association
- Doug Joy — Ontario Rural Wastewater Centre
- Wade Morrison — Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada
- Jim Myslik — Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
- Will Robertson — University of Waterloo
- James Ross — Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing
- Hugh Simpson — Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
- H.J. Smith — Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
- Bob Stone — Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
- Ted Taylor — Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs