

Is Your Septic Tank Full of It?

It is hard to believe that fall is here, the season where homeowners must rush to finish all of those outdoor projects before the snow flies and ground freezes. Fall is the perfect time to remember what lies below the surface, your septic system! If you don't remember when you last had your septic tank pumped, then chances are you're overdue. You don't want to wait until you have a problem and there is two feet of snow and ice to dig through to find your septic tank cover.

For most homeowners, the septic system is out of sight, out of mind. But it is important for us to know the basics. Your septic system is a complex system designed to treat waste water from your home before it is discharged into the ground. This system is composed of two parts: 1) a tank designed to remove solids, and 2) a leaching field that further treats the water before it becomes part of the groundwater again. Septic tanks should be inspected annually and pumped every two to three years, to help ensure proper operation of the system.

Failure of the system can occur if it is not properly maintained, and cause quite a mess inside and outside of your home. This failure can also result in the release of pollution such as nutrients, chemicals and bacteria into the ground water or surface water. This should be a concern to you, especially if you rely on well water for your drinking water supply or live near a waterbody such as a stream, river, lake or wetland.

Be aware that what you put down the drain or toilet has an impact on maintenance costs and the overall life of the system. Follow these suggestions for best results:

- ***Keep grease and garbage out of your drains, and avoid garbage disposal systems. The leftovers cause tanks to fill more quickly and slow the digestion process.***
- ***Conserve water by fixing leaks, installing water efficient appliances and fixtures, and not letting water run unnecessarily. This will minimize the volume of water your system must treat and extend the life of your system.***
- ***Only flush biodegradable wastes down the toilet. Non-biodegradable products like used cigarettes, clay based cat litter, and feminine hygiene products will clog the system.***
- ***Avoid putting hazardous materials down the drain. Paints, varnishes, chlorinated water, disinfectants, and expired prescription medications can contaminate the groundwater, clog the system, and be deadly to the essential working bacteria.***

Other more visible events can occur due to lack of maintenance or misuse, such as a "system back up," which results in raw sewage in your home or a saturated leach field where waste water appears at the ground surface. The costs from these situations can be far more expensive than the cost of regular maintenance like routine pumping of your septic system.

To learn more about your septic system, the Department of Environmental Service has a free video about septic systems on its web site at:

http://des.nh.gov/organization/divisions/water/wweb/homeowner_video.htm