



How Your Septic System Works

Your septic system is an important part of your home. Wastewater from your toilets, sinks, bathtubs, dishwashers and washers flows into your septic tank. Your septic tank is typically located about five to ten feet from your home. The tank's size is determined by the number of bedrooms in your home.

Wastewater from your home flows into the tank. Lighter materials like soap suds, fats and other light solids float on top of the tank forming a scum layer. Heavy solids settle to the bottom where they are broken down by bacteria. Not all solids can be broken down and remain as a layer of sludge on the bottom. Every few years, these layers of scum and sludge must be pumped out for the tank to function properly. Liquids flow out of the tank through the pipes to a drainfield where they are absorbed into the surrounding ground.

As the liquids percolate through the soil, they are filtered by chemical and biological processes in the soil. Eventually, the liquid flows into the groundwater supply and back to rivers and streams.

Proper care and maintenance of your septic system is critical to keeping your home, family and the surrounding environment healthy.

The Harpeth River Watershed is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) conservation organization that works to protect and restore the Harpeth River Watershed. Our four main program areas include:

RIVER RESTORATION



POLICY AND PLANNING



EDUCATION AND OUTREACH



WILDLIFE PROTECTION



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Maintaining Your Septic System



Healthy Septic Systems

Why Maintain Your Septic System?

Residential septic systems pose a serious threat to the water quality of the Harpeth River if they are not properly maintained. Overflow from improperly operating systems can flow into local streams bringing unhealthy bacteria and excess nutrients.

Maintaining the System Saves Money

Although it costs money to have your septic system pumped every few years, it saves much more money in the long run by preventing the need to dig up and replace the entire system. Replacing a system means digging up a large part of your yard and the subsequent costs to replace your landscaping.

Maintaining the System Keeps Your Family and the Environment Healthy

Overflow from failing septic systems can leak into the surrounding ground. This untreated water contains potentially harmful bacteria that can endanger your family. The untreated water flows through the soil and can threaten the health of nearby streams.

Maintaining the System Protects the Value of Your Property.

Failing septic systems can lead to property value decline for you and your neighbors. Properly maintaining your system will help maintain your home's value.

Guidelines to Keep Your Septic System Healthy

DO have your tank pumped every three to five years to remove the scum and sludge buildup.

DO keep heavy equipment or cars off the drain field and tank. Excess weight will damage the tank and the drain lines.

DO make an accurate drawing of your tank's location to avoid compromising it.

DO restrict the use of kitchen garbage disposals. The excess waste increases the amount of solids in the tank, slowing decomposition and risking overflow from the tank.

DO NOT pour grease or cooking oil down the kitchen sink. These items can clog the system.

DO NOT dump paints, motor oil, pesticides, fertilizers or other disinfectants down your drains. These chemicals kill the helpful bacteria in your septic tank and can leak out into the surrounding groundwater.

DO NOT flush plastics, disposable diapers or sanitary products down the toilet. These are not biodegradable and will clog the system.

DO NOT leave the water running for an extended amount of time. Excess water will cause the tank to overflow.

DO NOT use caustic drain openers for a clogged drain. Instead, use boiling water or a plumber's snake to clear up clogs.

Be Alert for Problems

The following signs can indicate a potential problem with your septic system. Contact your local maintenance company if you see these signs.

- Wet or standing water in your drainfield that doesn't evaporate in a day or two.
- Any septic odors in your home or yard.
- Back-up of sewage into your toilets or drains can indicate a clog or a possible system failure.