

Michigan Environmental Health Association Fact Sheet

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The Home Septic System

What the homeowner must know about their septic system

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In many areas of Michigan, the septic system, is relied upon to safely dispose of household sewage. When the homeowner understands how it works, and how to take care of it they can increase the life of the system. Misuse or neglect could cause problems, unnecessary expense and even a failure of the septic system.

WHY THE CONCERN?

A failed septic system, where sewage is pooling in the yard or backing up in the house is a health hazard. People and pets could become ill if they come into contact with open sewage. A failed system is a public health hazard and a neighborhood nuisance.

WHAT IS IT?

A septic system normally has two basic parts - a water-tight septic tank for collecting raw sewage and an underground drainfield to dispose of the sewage. The septic tank allows the heavy solids to settle out and decompose slowly by bacterial action. The liquid from the septic tank is released underground through a series of perforated pipes surrounded by loose stone to absorb the liquid into the soil.

FACTORS DETERMINING DESIGN

A septic system must be designed to accept the expected amount of sewage which flows from a home. Some concerns are the soil types found on the property, seasonal high groundwater table, safe ground distances from water supplies, lakes and streams and an area for a replacement system. Land with heavy clay soils, a high seasonal ground water table, flooding conditions, poor drainage, and/or steep slopes may not be approved for a regular septic system. If a regular septic system cannot be used an alternative system may be permitted.

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WATER USAGE

Conserving water is extremely important to extend the life of the septic system. Repairing leaks and installing appliances and fixtures which use less water will help save water. It is helpful to do laundry over a period of days rather than all on a single day to avoid large volumes of water entering the system at one time. Try to wash only full loads to conserve on total water usage.

Some water sources from a household are not considered sewage and should not be connected to a septic system. Check sump pumps to see that water from the footing drains is not being pumped to the septic tank. Water softener recharge water is not considered sewage and should not be connected to the septic system.

Outside, homeowners should see that surface drainage and eavestrough downspouts are directed away from the septic system.

PHYSICAL DAMAGE

Vehicles should not be driven over the septic system. Their weight can damage the septic piping system and can lead to expensive repair/replacement.

Do not put blacktop, concrete, outbuildings, large above-ground swimming pools, and other structures over the top of the septic system. These structures make repairs to the septic system difficult. The structures interfere with operation of the septic system and may cause failure.

MAINTENANCE

Routine maintenance of the septic tank by pumping accumulated solids every three to five years may increase the life of the drainfield and prolong the necessity of field replacement. If solids are allowed to accumulate in the tank, they may be carried over into the drainfield which results in clogging of the soil pores and may cause system failure. Inspection of the system and/or pumping of the septic tank is recommended. Home owners should not utilize their systems for disposal of non-decomposable matter such as cloth and plastic. Garbage disposals increase the accumulation of solids in the septic tank and, depending on the amount of their use, may increase the need for pumping. Commercially available septic tank additives are not necessary for the proper operation of a household septic system.

INFORMATION - IT IS AT YOUR LOCAL HEALTH DEPARTMENT

If your system was installed under a permit issued by your local health department, there should be a record of the septic system. The record may tell you the location and the size of the septic system. Your local department welcomes your inquiries.

FOR INFORMATION CONTACT: