

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.

Some Symptoms of a Malfunctioning Septic System:

- household drains slow down
- toilets back up
- sewage smell in yard
- grass over sewage system is unusually green and/or spongy
- bacteria or nitrate contamination shows up in well water
- surface ponding of effluent



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.