5. Household Practices

Many household chemicals can harm the helpful bacteria in your septic system. Without these important bacteria, the system may malfunction. Chemicals do not decompose easily and can contaminate the groundwater once in the drainfield.

DO NOT POUR DOWN THE DRAIN...

- Paints
- Solvents
- Acids
- Drain cleaners
- Oils
- Bleach (in large quantities)

Reducing the amount of wastewater generated can extend the life of your septic system. Less water in the septic tank provides more storage area for the raw wastewater. A lot less water in the drainfield means that the soil will have a better chance to decompose the wastes.

Some water conservation methods include:

- Installing low-flow toilets.
- Taking shorter showers.
- Replacing leaky faucets and toilets immediately.

DO NOT FLUSH...

- Diapers
- Baby wipes
- Sanitary napkins
- Tampons
- Cigarette butts
- Grease
- Coffee grounds
- Fats

These materials do not decompose in the septic tank and will clog the system.

Try to limit the use of your garbage disposal. It can add excess material to the septic system that takes a long time to decompose. Try composting your food waste instead.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Call your Local Cooperative Extension Service office. Also, check our website: www.fcs.uga.edu/housing

6. Signs of Trouble

Some warning signs that a septic system is not working properly include:

- Soil odors in your home or yard.
- Wet, spongy ground or lush plant growth that appears near a leach field or drainfield.
- Foul smells only because of a dog in the house pipes, septic system, or drainfield.
- Fixtures that drain slowly because of a clog in the house pipes, septic system, or drainfield.

Respond quickly to any problems you observe.

Contact a professional to address the problem. If you need to expand or modify the septic system, keep in mind that the cost is worth the investment to protect your family’s health and the coastal waterways.

If your home has a septic system, it requires regular maintenance to prevent costly damage and repairs. Septic systems are designed to safely use natural processes to treat and dispose of the wastewater generated in your home. If a septic system is not maintained, untreated human waste may contaminate drinking water supplies and negatively impact the environment. Keeping your septic system working properly is a wise investment for economic, human health, and environmental reasons.

By completing the risk assessment on the next page, you will be able to:

- Protect your investment and increase the value of your home.
- Protect the health of your family and neighbors by protecting your drinking water.
- Avoid costly repairs through proper maintenance.
- Protect Georgia’s coastal wildlife and seafood industry.

Do I have a Septic System?

Homes with a septic system have a tank buried in the yard with an access pipe located at the surface of the ground. Also, a drainfield will be located beyond the septic tank. If your water is not supplied by a city or county drinking water system, chances are you have a septic tank.

How Does It Work?

Wastewater flows out of your home and into a septic tank buried in the yard. Bacteria in the tank break down wastes. The liquid inside the tank flows into a series of underground pipes called drainfield – that release treated wastewater to the soil beneath your yard. The liquid waste is deepened and absorbed by the soil. If a septic system is not maintained, raw waste may affect the quality of your water supply. In coastal areas, it is important that the wastewater is deep enough to allow the soil to filter and treat the wastewater.

Before Buying a Home...

Prior to purchasing a previously-owned home, ask the previous homeowner about the septic system. Also, ask the homeowner for a copy of any maps and/or records that he/she may have regarding the septic system.

Notes: *Information is not available from the previous owner, have your septic system inspected by a county health inspector and pumped by a professional. If you are buying a new home, the builder should provide you information on the construction of the septic system. Location of the septic tank and drainfield, and size of the septic tank.
Importance Of Maintenance

Maintaining your septic system protects your investment, drinking water, and nearby streams. Pumping the septic system regularly every 3 to 5 years will prevent the system from overflowing. If a septic tank overflows, the wastewater will mix with solid waste in the tank and could clog the drainfield causing drains and toilets to "back up." Also, the raw waste may flow into drinking water wells or runoff into streams that lead to the ocean and estuaries.

Risks of Septic System Failure

Risk Assessment: This table will help you determine your risk for unexpected costly repairs on your septic system and actions that may pollute your drinking water.

For each statement on the left, read across to the right and check the box that best describes the conditions of your septic system. Your risk ranking is listed at the top of each column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ISSUE</th>
<th>LOW RISK</th>
<th>MEDIUM RISK</th>
<th>HIGH RISK</th>
<th>YOUR RISK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tank Pumping (See Table 2)</td>
<td>The septic tank is pumped on a regular basis as determined by an annual inspection or every 3 to 5 years.</td>
<td>The septic tank is pumped, but not regularly.</td>
<td>The septic tank is not pumped. The holding tank overflows or leaks between pumpings.</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverting surface water</td>
<td>All surface water is diverted away from the drainfield.</td>
<td>Some surface water flows into the drainfield.</td>
<td>Runoff from rooftops, land, and/or driveways flows into the drainfield. Some surface water flows into the drainfield.</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trees and shrubs over the drainfield</td>
<td>No trees and shrubs within 50 feet of the drainfield.</td>
<td>Trees and shrubs are within 25 to 50 feet of the drainfield.</td>
<td>Trees and shrubs are within 25 feet of the drainfield.</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Practices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garbage Disposal</td>
<td>Do not use a garbage disposal.</td>
<td>Minimum use of a garbage disposal (3-2 times per week).</td>
<td>Garbage disposal used more than 3 times per week.</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposal of wastes in sink and toilet</td>
<td>No grease, fats, or coffee grounds are put down the drain. Only toilet tissue is flushed down the toilet.</td>
<td>Grease, coffee grounds, and food are put down the drain and/or septic tank.</td>
<td>Grease, coffee grounds, and food are put down the drain and/or septic tank.</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Chemicals</td>
<td>Do not put paints, solvents, and/or pesticides down the drain or toilet.</td>
<td>猛</td>
<td>Put paints, solvents, and pesticides down the drain or toilet.</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water use</td>
<td>Use some water-saving fixtures and practices. Leaks are quickly fixed.</td>
<td>Use some water-saving fixtures and practices. Leaks are quickly fixed.</td>
<td>No effort is made to conserve water and leaks are fixed when convenient.</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signs of Trouble</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixtures drain slowly</td>
<td>Usually.</td>
<td>Sometimes - 1 to 3 times per year.</td>
<td>Rarely - less than 3 times per year.</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surfacings of sewage</td>
<td>Never noticed.</td>
<td>Notice more than 3 times in a year.</td>
<td>Occasionally, at least once a year.</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roots plugging the drainfield lines</td>
<td>Never had a problem with roots in your drainfield.</td>
<td>Have occasional experiences with roots plugging the lines.</td>
<td>Have frequent experiences with roots plugging the lines.</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the table above, low risks are the goal. Medium and High-Risk situations need to be addressed.

Here's What You Can Do:

1. Septic System Location

To keep wastewater in the drainfield from contaminating a water well, a drainfield should be 100 feet from another well, stream, or wetland. Also, it should be down hill from a well. The septic tank should be 50 feet from a stream, wetland, or wetland.

2. Septic Tank Capacity

Each day, you use about 75 gallons of water. Septic tanks should be large enough to hold two days worth of wastewater on the heaviest use days. Use the chart below to determine if your tank is the right size.

3. Septic Tank Maintenance and Pumping

Septic systems must be between 20 to 30 years. Even longer when pumped regularly. Have your septic system pumped out every 3 to 5 years. If you know when your septic system was last pumped, the following chart (Table 2) can help determine the recommended years between pumpings.

4. Drainfield Maintenance

The weight of vehicles or heavy equipment can damage a drainfield if driven or parked on top of the system. These vehicles compact the soil and prevent water from flowing away from the drainfield. Trees and shrubs closer than 50 feet to the drainfield will not cause damage. Water flow from the drainfield needs to be diverted away from the drainfield. Hoses can be attached at the downspout to direct the water to another part of the lawn (not the drainfield). Protect rainwater from flooding puddles near the system.
