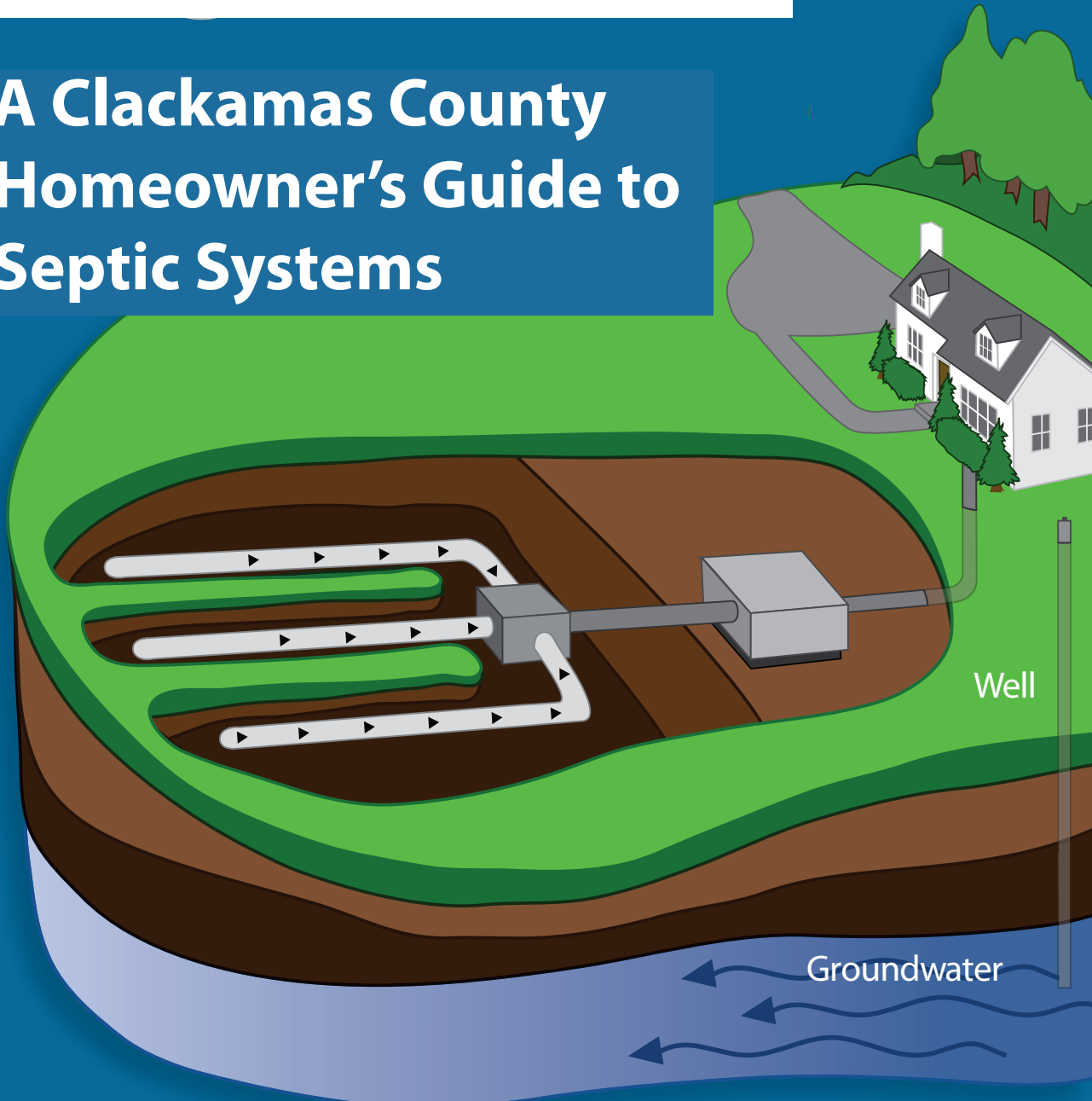


# Do your Part — Be SepticSmart!

## A Clackamas County Homeowner's Guide to Septic Systems



Based on:



Sponsored by:



# Maintaining Your Septic System:

## Good for your wallet. Good for your health. Good for the environment.

Did you know that there are over 9,000 septic systems in the Clackamas River Watershed and many more in Clackamas County? If you're not properly maintaining your septic system, you're not only hurting the environment, you're putting your family's health at risk—and may be flushing thousands of dollars down the drain!

### First Things First:

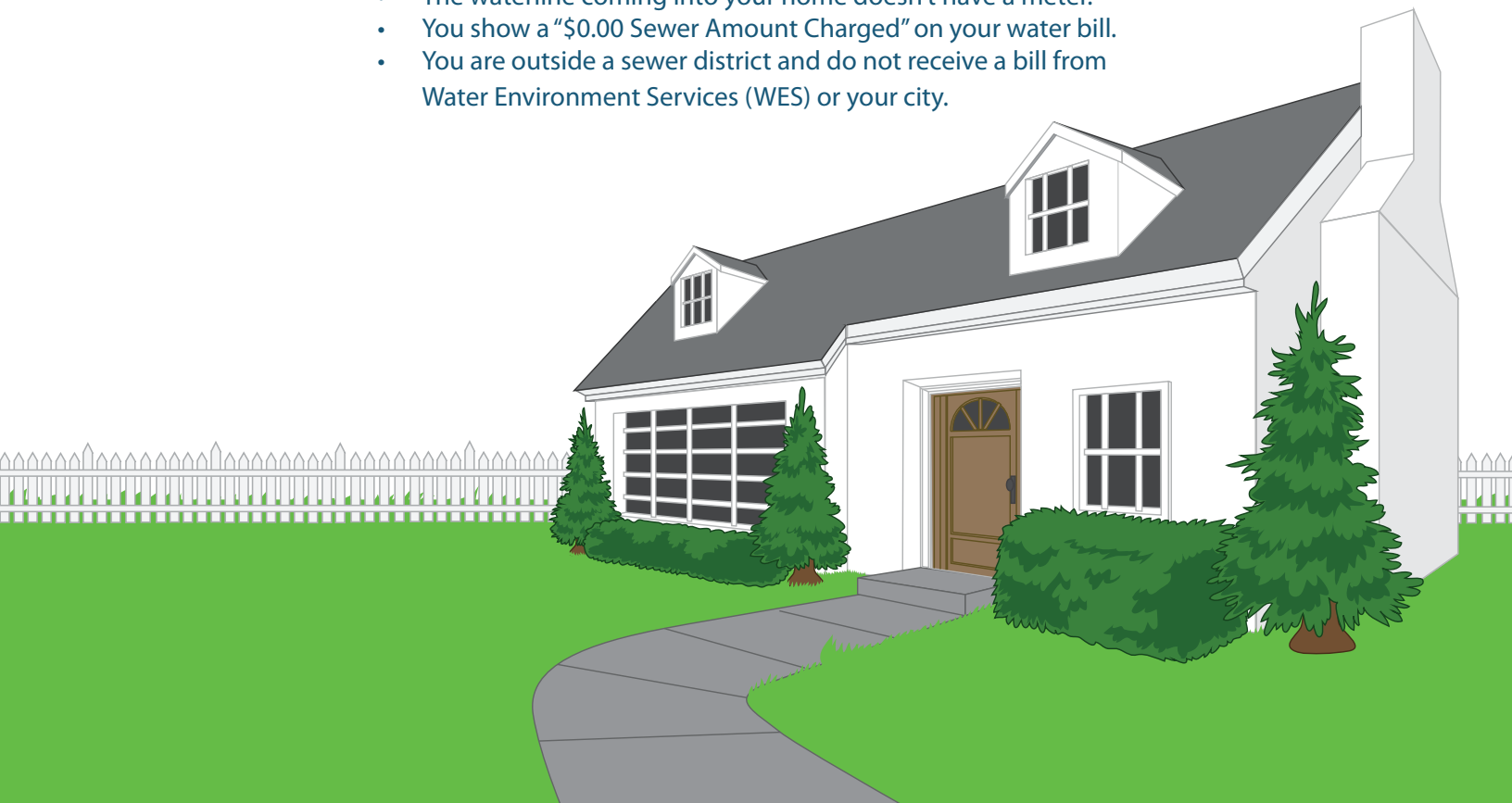
#### What Is a Septic System?

Common in rural areas without centralized sewer systems, septic systems are underground wastewater treatment structures that use a combination of nature and time-tested technology to treat wastewater from household plumbing produced by bathrooms, kitchen drains, and laundry.

#### Do You Have a Septic System?

You may already know you have a septic system. If you don't know, here are tell-tale signs that you probably do:

- You use well water.
- The waterline coming into your home doesn't have a meter.
- You show a "\$0.00 Sewer Amount Charged" on your water bill.
- You are outside a sewer district and do not receive a bill from Water Environment Services (WES) or your city.



## How To Find Your Septic System

Once you've determined that you have a septic system, you can find it by:

- Looking on your home's "as built" drawing.
- Checking your yard for lids and manhole covers.
- Contacting a septic inspector/pumper to help you locate it.
- Call Clackamas County Water Environment Services to see if they have old records.

## Why Should You Maintain Your Septic System?

### Maintaining Your Septic System...

#### Saves You Money

Regular maintenance fees of \$350 to \$450 every three to four years is a bargain compared to the cost of repairing or replacing a malfunctioning system, which can cost from \$3,000 up to \$20,000. The frequency of pumping required for your system depends on how many people live in your home and the size of the system.

#### Protects Your Property Value

An unusable septic system or one in disrepair will lower your property value, not to mention pose a potentially costly legal liability.

#### Keeps You and Your Neighbors Healthy

Household wastewater is loaded with disease-causing bacteria and viruses, personal care products, as well as high levels of nitrogen and phosphorus. If a septic system is well-maintained and working properly, it will remove most of these pollutants. Insufficiently treated sewage from septic systems can cause groundwater contamination, which can spread disease in humans and animals. If you are on a private well, this may be the water you drink.

Improperly treated sewage also poses the risk of contaminating nearby surface waters, significantly increasing the chance of swimmers contracting a variety of infectious diseases, from eye and ear infections to acute gastrointestinal illness and hepatitis.

### Service provider coming? Here's what you need to know.

When you call a septic service provider, they will inspect your tank for leaks and examine the scum and sludge layers. In Clackamas County, if the total of the sludge and scum layers is greater than 1/3 (33%) of the operating volume, your tank will need to be pumped.

As part of this inspection you should at a minimum, ask for documentation of the following:

- Approximate age and type of the system; Size of tank; Type of tank material; Condition and integrity of baffles; Overall condition/integrity of tank
- Diagram of the location of the septic tank, distribution box, and drainfield (if possible) in relation to the house and rest of the property
- General site evaluation: any drainfield issues, ponding, odors, or other evidence of system failure
- Identification of any repairs needed and/or completed, and the date of the next service

To locate a licensed service professional in your area, visit the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality website at <http://www.deq.state.or.us/we/onsite/sdssearch.asp>. When conducting your search, set the License Status to active and select Clackamas County from the Location Criteria drop down menu.

## Beware of septic tank additives!

Some makers of septic tank additives claim their products break down septic tank sludge in order to eliminate the need for pumping. But the effectiveness of additives has not been determined; in fact, many studies show that additives have no significant effects on a tank's bacterial populations.

Septic tanks already contain the microbes they need for the effective breakdown of household wastewater pollutants. Periodic pumping is the only true way to ensure that septic systems work properly and provide many years of service.

### Protects the Environment

In Clackamas County millions of gallons of water is dispersed below the ground's surface every day. That is a lot of water! Groundwater contaminated by poorly or untreated household wastewater doesn't just pose dangers to drinking water—it poses dangers to the environment. Malfunctioning septic systems release bacteria, viruses, and chemicals toxic to local waterways. When these pollutants are released into the ground, they eventually enter streams, rivers, lakes, and more, harming local ecosystems by killing native plants, fish, and shellfish and affecting local drinking water.

## Maintaining Your Septic System:

### The Basics

Septic system maintenance isn't complicated, and it doesn't need to be expensive. Upkeep comes down to four important elements:

- Inspection and pumping
- Water efficiency
- Proper waste disposal
- Drainfield care

### Inspect and pump frequently

The average household septic system should be inspected at least every three years by a septic service professional. Household septic tanks are typically pumped every three to five years. Alternative systems with electrical float switches, pumps or mechanical components need to be inspected more often, generally once a year. In Oregon Alternative Treatment Technology (ATT) systems are required to be under a maintenance contract throughout the life of the system.

Four major factors influence the frequency of septic pumping:

- Household size
- Total wastewater generated
- Volume of solids in wastewater
- Septic tank size



## Use water efficiently

Did you know that average indoor water use in a typical single-family home is nearly 70 gallons per individual, per day? And just a single leaky toilet can waste as much as 200 gallons of water per day?

All of the water a household sends down its pipes winds up in its septic system. This means that the more water a household conserves, the less water enters the septic system. Efficient water use can not only improve the operation of a septic system, but it can reduce the risk of failure as well. Learn more about simple ways to save water and water efficient products by visiting EPA's WaterSense Program at [www.epa.gov/watersense](http://www.epa.gov/watersense). Or visit the Clackamas River Water Providers website at [www.clackamasproviders.org/water-conservation.html](http://www.clackamasproviders.org/water-conservation.html)

- **High-efficiency toilets:** Toilet use accounts for 25 to 30 percent of household water use. Most older homes have toilets with 3.5- to 5-gallon reservoirs, while newer, high-efficiency toilets use 1.6 gallons of water or less per flush. Replacing existing toilets with high-efficiency models is an easy way to quickly reduce the amount of household water entering your septic system.
- **Faucet aerators and high-efficiency showerheads:** Faucet aerators help reduce water use as well as the volume of water entering your septic system. High-efficiency showerheads or shower flow restrictors also reduce water use.
- **Washing machines:** Washing small loads of laundry on your washing machine's large-load cycle wastes water and energy. By selecting the proper load size, you'll reduce water waste. If you're unable to select a load size, run only full loads of laundry.

Another tip? Try to spread water use via washing machine throughout the week. Doing all household laundry in one day might seem like a time-saver, but it can be harmful to your septic system, as it doesn't allow your septic tank time to adequately treat waste and could potentially flood your drainfield.

Consider purchasing an ENERGY STAR<sup>®</sup> clothes washer, which uses 35 percent less energy and a whopping 50 percent less water than a standard model. Learn more about ENERGY STAR appliances by visiting [www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov).

## Small leaks can lead to big problems!

When it comes to water fixtures, a couple of quick fixes can save you serious problems down the road!

Check to see if your toilet's reservoir is leaking into your toilet bowl by adding five drops of liquid food coloring to the toilet reservoir then wait 15 minutes. If the dye is in the toilet bowl, the reservoir is leaking and repairs are needed.

Think a leaky faucet is no big deal? Think again. A small drip from a faucet adds gallons of unnecessary water to your septic system every day.

To see how much a leak adds to your water usage, place a cup under the drip for 10 minutes. Multiply the amount of water in the cup by 144 (the number of minutes in 24 hours, divided by 10). Just one cup of leaky faucet water every 10 minutes equals 36 wasted gallons of water a day -- and they all end up in your septic system.

New faucets and toilet reservoirs are easily accessible and inexpensive. Choose to make a small investment for a big difference in your septic system.

- **Proper waste disposal:** Whether you flush it down the toilet, grind it in the garbage disposal, or pour it down the sink, shower, or bath, everything that goes down your drains ends up in your septic system. And what goes down the drain can have a major impact on how well your septic system works.

### Toilets Aren't Trash Cans!

Your septic system is not a trash can. An easy rule of thumb? Don't flush anything besides human waste and toilet paper.

#### Never flush:

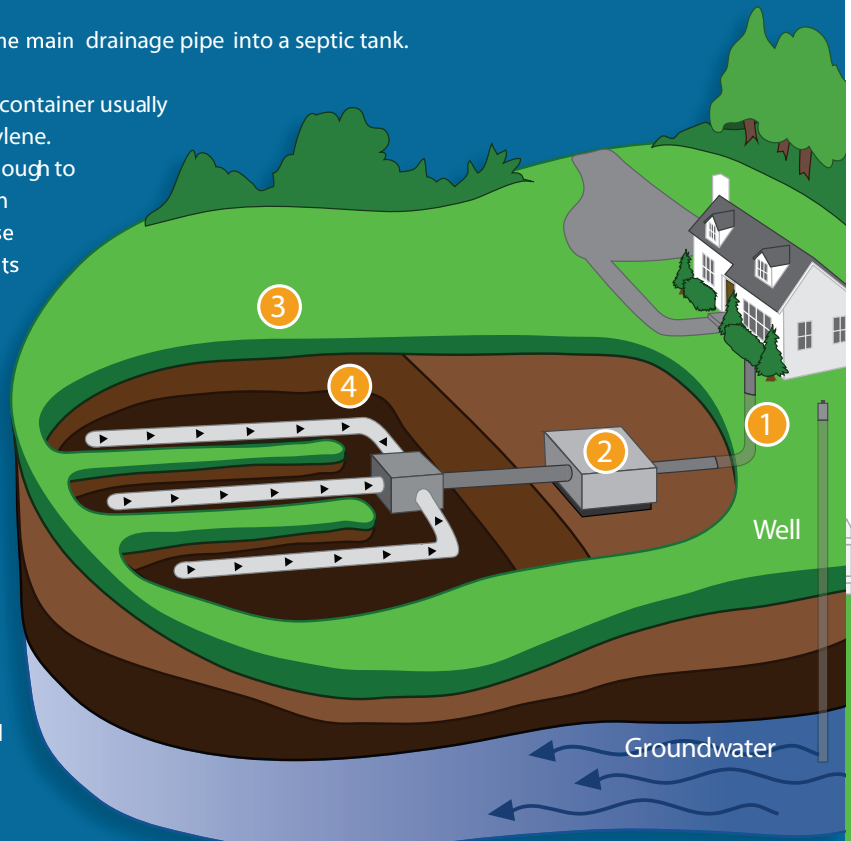
- Feminine hygiene products
- Condoms
- Dental floss
- Diapers
- Cigarette butts
- Coffee grounds
- Cat litter
- Household chemicals like gasoline oil, pesticides, antifreeze, and paint
- Pharmaceuticals

For a complete list, visit [water.epa.gov/septicmart](http://water.epa.gov/septicmart).

## How does a septic system work?

This is a simplified overview of how a septic system works.

- 1 All water runs out of your house from one main drainage pipe into a septic tank.
- 2 The septic tank is a buried, water-tight container usually made of concrete, fiberglass or polyethylene. Its job is to hold the wastewater long enough to allow solids to settle down to the bottom (forming sludge), while the oil and grease floats to the top (as scum). Compartments and a T-shaped outlet prevent the sludge and scum from leaving the tank and traveling into the drainfield area.
- 3 The liquid wastewater then exits the tank into the drainfield, a network of buried pipes that distribute wastewater over a large area. If the drainfield is overloaded with too much liquid, it will flood, causing sewage to flow to the ground surface or create backups in toilets and sinks.
- 4 Finally, the wastewater percolates into the soil, naturally removing harmful bacteria, viruses, and nutrients.



## What do you mean, removes “most” of the pollutants?

Effluent from the septic tank is distributed through your drainfield allowing the liquid to percolate throughout the soil. The major pollutants in the effluent are nitrates, phosphates, and disease-causing organisms such as bacteria and viruses. The soil does a good job of removing the bacteria and viruses. Such organisms do not survive long under well-drained soil conditions. But, when high groundwater exists, as it does in many areas of Clackamas County during wet winter months, disease-causing organisms are NOT as quickly removed and can travel long distances from the drainfield area.

Effluent contains nitrates and phosphates, similar to those found in commercial fertilizers. The phosphates are usually removed by the soil and usually present few problems unless the system is near a water body. Nitrates are NOT usually removed by soil and therefore pass through it, concentrating in groundwater tables. High concentrations of nitrates in drinking water can be unhealthy, particularly to babies and young children. Excess nutrients in nearby lakes and streams contribute to excessive algae and plant growth leading to potentially unhealthy conditions for people and fish.



### Safe disposal of pharmaceuticals

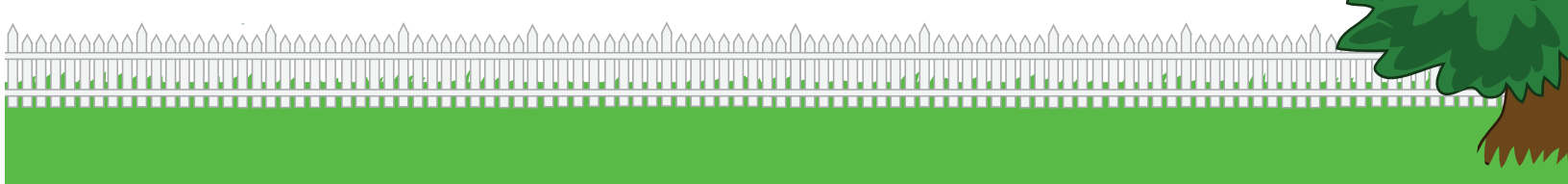
In addition to nutrients, septic systems are not designed to remove prescription medications. Flushing unwanted or expired medications down the toilet can have damaging effects on the environment and can contaminate surface and groundwater supplies.

Clackamas County now has nine Drug Take Back Boxes located throughout the county! Use these boxes to protect our environment and keep drugs out of the hands of children and teens.

Go to [www.clackamasproviders.org](http://www.clackamasproviders.org) to find the nearest location.

### How Long Does the Average Septic Tank Last?

- Concrete, poly and fiberglass tanks should last the life of the dwelling.
- Steel tanks should last 7-10 years.
- The drainfield is the part of the system prone to failure. Proper maintenance inspections of septic systems reduces the chances of failure.



## Own an RV, boat or mobile home?

Waste from RVs, boats or mobile homes may not be discharged to a septic system. Use a properly permitted RV dump station. Learn more about proper and safe waste water disposal -- download EPA's factsheet at [www.epa.gov/region9/water/groundwater/uic-pdfs/rv-wastewater.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/region9/water/groundwater/uic-pdfs/rv-wastewater.pdf) or call the National Small Flows Clearinghouse's Septic System Care hotline toll-free at 1-800-624-8301.

### Take care at the drain

Your septic system contains a collection of living organisms that digest and treat household waste. Pouring toxins down your drain can kill these organisms and harm your septic system. Whether you're at the kitchen sink, bathtub, or utility sink:

- Avoid chemical drain openers for a clogged drain. Instead use boiling water or a drain snake.
- Never pour cooking oil or grease down the drain.
- Never pour oil-based paints, solvents, or large volumes of toxic cleaners down the drain. Even latex paint waste should be minimized.
- Eliminating or limiting the use of a garbage disposal, significantly reduces the amount of fats, grease, and solids that enter your septic tank and ultimately clog its drainfield.
- Septic systems are not designed to remove toxic contaminants. Consider using household cleaning products that are safer for the environment. Look for products with the EPA Design for the Environment (DfE) label.
- Don't flush prescribed or over the counter drugs. Instead take them to a drop box at local law enforcement offices or other collection events.

### Maintain your drainfield

Your drainfield—a component of your septic system that removes contaminants from the liquid that emerges from your septic tank—is an important part of your septic system. Here are a few things you should do to maintain it:

- Never park or drive on your drainfield.
- Do not cover your drainfield with non-porous structures like garages, patios, or driveways.
- Plant trees the appropriate distance from your drainfield to keep roots from growing into your septic system. A septic service professional can advise you of the proper distance, depending on your septic tank and landscape.
- Keep roof drains, sump pumps, and other rainwater drainage systems away from your drainfield area, as excess water slows down or stops the wastewater treatment process.





## Failure Causes

Pouring household and home improvement chemicals down your drains, flushing garbage down toilets, excessive water use, and failure to provide proper maintenance aren't the only culprits for septic system failure. Take note of these additional causes of septic failure:

### Hot tubs

Hot tubs may be a great way to relax, but when it comes to emptying them, your septic system should be avoided. Emptying a hot tub into your septic system stirs the solids in the tank, pushing them into the drainfield, causing it to clog and fail.

Drain cooled hot tub water onto turf or landscaped areas far away from your septic tank and drainfield, and in accordance with local regulations. Use the same caution when draining swimming pools. Read *Disposing of Chlorinated Water from Swimming Pools and Hot Tubs* found online at <http://www.deq.state.or.us/wq/pubs/pubs.htm#fs>

### Water purification and softening systems

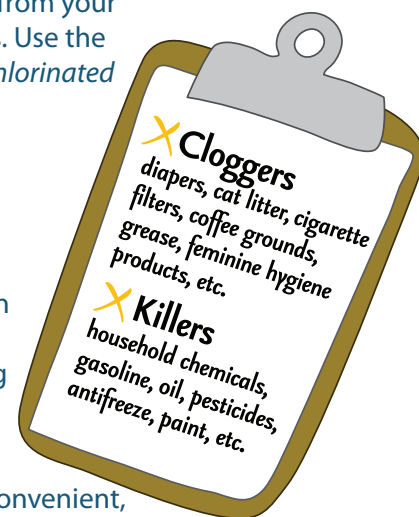
Some freshwater purification systems, including water softeners, unnecessarily pump water into septic systems. Such systems can send hundreds of gallons of water to septic tanks, causing agitation of solids and excess flow to drainfields. When researching water purification and softening systems, check with a licensed plumbing professional about alternative routing for such treatment systems.

### Garbage disposals

Consider eliminating or limit the use of garbage disposals. While convenient, frequent use of garbage disposals significantly increases the accumulation of sludge and scum in septic tanks, resulting in the need for more frequent pumping.

### Improper design or installation

The proper design and installation of a septic system is essential for it to correctly function. A home's groundwater table, soil composition, and a properly leveled drainfield are just a few factors to ensure a well-functioning septic system. Be sure to do your research when hiring septic professionals.



## Failure symptoms: Mind the signs!

A foul odor isn't always the first sign of a malfunctioning septic system. Call a septic professional if you notice any of the following:

- Wastewater backing up into household drains.
- Bright green, spongy grass on the drainfield, even during dry weather.
- Pooling water or muddy soil around your septic system or in your basement.
- A strong odor around the septic tank and drainfield.

Mind the signs of a failing system. One call to a septic professional could save you thousands of dollars!

## Local Sources of Information:

### Clackamas County Water Environment Services/ Soils

150 Beaver Creek Rd. Oregon City, OR 97045

503-742-4740

soilsconcern@co.clackamas.or.us

Water Environment Services (WES) provides Wastewater Collection & Treatment and Biosolids Reuse for seven cities and several unincorporated areas in Clackamas County. Stormwater Management, On-Site Sewage Disposal, and Water Quality and Stream Enhancement projects are also coordinated by WES. The public service counter is staffed Monday - Thursday.

### Oregon Onsite Wastewater Association

70 SW Century Dr., PMB 353

Bend, OR 97702

www.o2wa.org

O2WA is an organization supporting persons engaged in the design, installation, maintenance, and regulation of onsite wastewater treatment and disposal systems.

### Oregon Department of Environmental Quality

For more information about DEQ's Onsite Wastewater Management Program call 541-686-7905

<http://www.deq.state.or.us/wq/onsite/onsite.htm>

Over 30% of Oregonians dispose of wastewater from their homes and businesses through the use of septic systems. The siting, design, installation and ongoing operation and maintenance of septic systems are regulated by DEQ. Without this oversight, septic systems can fail or malfunction, pollute Oregon's land and waterways with raw sewage and create public health hazards.

### United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development

Section 504 Home Repair Loans and Grants

[http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/OR%20sfh\\_504.html](http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/OR%20sfh_504.html)

The Section 504 program helps very low-income homeowners in eligible rural areas remove health and safety hazards from their homes, to improve or modernize them, and to make them accessible for people with disabilities. Grants are available for homeowners age 62 and older who cannot afford to repay a loan at a one-percent interest rate.

### Energy Trust of Oregon

<http://energytrust.org/residential/incentives/water-heating/wastewatertreatment>

Alternative On-Site Wastewater Treatment Systems

Incentives available for homeowners who are not connected to a municipal sewer system or whose property is not suitable for a septic system. For more information call 866-368-7878.



You may download this publication from these websites:

[www.clackamasproviders.org](http://www.clackamasproviders.org)

[www.conservationdistrict.org](http://www.conservationdistrict.org)

[www.clackamas.us/wes/septic.html](http://www.clackamas.us/wes/septic.html)



State of Oregon  
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Environmental  
Quality



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CLACKAMAS COUNTY SOIL AND WATER  
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