



Septic Systems

Fact Sheet

The Basics

A septic system is an individual underground sewage disposal system, usually consisting of a septic tank and a disposal system. The tank is usually rectangular in shape and made of concrete, concrete blocks or steel. The top of the tank is fitted with one or two manholes or clean-out holes with covers for easy inspection and maintenance. While newly installed tanks have a minimum 1500 gallon capacity, older homes may have smaller tanks. The disposal system typically consists of drain fields (gravel-filled trenches with perforated pipe or a raised sand mound). Older homes may have dry wells.

Maintaining Smooth Operations

Use the following suggestions to extend the life of your septic system.

- Routine maintenance is recommended; use a licensed septic scavenger service to pump the system every 3 to 5 years.
- Do not overload your system. For example, space laundry loads out over several days.
- The tank should receive all the waste water from your house, including that from dishwashers, washing machines, and garbage grinder. Rainwater from downspouts, water from foundation drains or other water **should not** be piped into your septic system.
- Cooking greases and fats should be poured into a waste container, which can be disposed with your garbage. Flushing yeast and chemicals into the system will not reduce the solids in the tank. Septic systems are designed to function without additives.
- Normal amounts of bleach, cleaners and drain cleaning chemicals do not normally interfere with the operation of the septic tank system.
- Shrub and tree plantings are prohibited on mound design sewage disposal systems. Septic systems are vulnerable to clogging from root growth and may function improperly or fail prematurely as a result. There are no regulations to prohibit planting near an in-ground septic system.
- Motor vehicles should not be allowed to drive over any part of your underground system.

Troubleshooting

If your septic system is failing, contact a plumber or septic contractor (licensure by St. Mary's County Health Department is required) to evaluate whether the problem may be due to a clogged or damaged pipe or septic tank. **If the problem is not the result of a clogged or damaged pipe or septic tank, an on-site soil evaluation must be arranged with the St. Mary's County Health Department.** You or the licensed septic contractor of your choice may schedule a repair perc test. Until the septic repairs are completed, contact a licensed septic scavenger service to have the septic tank pumped. Minimize waste water to prevent further discharge or sewage to the ground surface.

For more information:

- St. Mary's County Health Department: Environmental Health Services- 301-475-4321