

The Clean Water Network is featuring this article on ways people can ensure a functioning septic system. EPA and state agencies are finding increasing evidence that failing septic systems are degrading water quality. Thanks to Corey Tournet, President of The Laundry Alternative, Inc. for contributing this article.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS OF FAILING SEPTIC SYSTEMS

When you buy a car, you are given an owner's manual containing instructions on how to care for your car. Septic systems can cost as much or more than cars. Unfortunately, nobody gives you a manual when they are installed. Most people have little idea of how a septic system works, which is why failing septic systems are such a serious environmental, health and financial problem. Some people don't even know they have a septic system! As a result, many septic systems fail unnecessarily. The costs of failure are high. More than 1200 people die each year from contaminated water, and failing septic systems are a leading source of waterborne disease outbreaks in the country today. There are some simple steps to take to make sure your septic system is working properly.

Use a Washing Machine Filter.

Did you know that washing machines are one of the leading causes of septic system failure? The primary culprit is lint generated by washing machines, which clogs the soil in drain fields. Lint screens and nylon socks trap less than five percent of the lint fibers. These minute particles, because they are so small and light, do not settle in the septic tank. Instead, they stay in suspension and are flushed out to the drain field where they plug-up the pores of the soil bed.

The good news is that lint can be prevented from entering the septic system through the use of a reusable, inline filter, which attaches to your washing machine discharge hose.

Avoid Excessive Water Use.

You can also damage your septic system by doing a large number of laundry loads in a short period of time. In standard septic systems, solid materials settle in the tank, while effluent flows out into the ground. If you put more water into the septic system than it is built to handle, the high volume of water will flood your system, and can also flush solids out of the tank into the drain field. A typical washing machine can use up to 62 gallons of water per wash load. On a heavy wash day you can easily put 400, 500, 600 gallons of water down the drain in a few hours. The solution is to spread out your water use. Do one or two loads of laundry per day, rather than 10-15 loads on Saturday morning.

Water softeners can also damage your system by putting too much water through the septic system. These devices can put several hundred gallons of water down the drain every week that is not contaminated and does not need to go through the treatment process. Fortunately, there are a couple solutions to this problem. You can upgrade your softener with a newer efficient model that uses less water and regenerates on demand. You can also install a mini-septic system for your softener.

Prevent Solids from Leaving the Tank.

First of all, you should get your tank pumped at regularly scheduled intervals to prevent excessive accumulation of solids in the tank. Under normal conditions, you should have the tank pumped and inspected every 1-3 years. Very Important: Tanks should be pumped and inspected through the manhole cover, not the inspection pipe.

Effluent filters, about \$70, are installed (by a contractor) in the exit baffle of the tank and stop the larger solids from getting out to the drain field. These filters are cleaned every few years when you have your tank pumped. They are cheap insurance and along with a washing machine filter, one of the best things you can do to protect your system.

Usage of Household Cleaning Products.

Excessive use of these products can contribute to septic system failure. If you do over 5 loads a week using bleach, problems could arise. Avoid powdered detergents, as they contain non-biodegradable fillers that can plug up your system. Also, be careful with harsh automatic toilet bowl cleaners, which have put quite a few septic systems out of commission.

Other tips:

- ❖ Only discharge biodegradable wastes into system.
- ❖ Divert surface runoff water from roofs, patios, driveways, and other areas away from your drain field.
- ❖ Keep your septic tank cover accessible.
- ❖ Have your septic tank pumped regularly. It should also be inspected for leaks, cracks, and to make sure the exit baffle is in place.
- ❖ Compost your garbage or put it in the trash.
- ❖ Divert surface runoff water from roofs, patios, driveways, and other areas away from the drain field.

Don't:

- ❖ Use a garbage disposal. These items usually double the amount of solids added to the tank!
- ❖ Flush sanitary napkins, tampons, disposable diapers, condoms and other non-biodegradable products into your system.
- ❖ Dump solvents, oils, paints, thinners, disinfectants, pesticides or poisons down the drain, which can disrupt the treatment process and contaminate the groundwater.
- ❖ Use harsh toilet bowl cleaners, which have put quite a few septic systems out of commission.
- ❖ Dig in your drain field or build anything over it.

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