

Caring for your septic system



Your septic system and source water protection

Waterloo Region relies on groundwater for drinking water. Keeping groundwater clean is not only good for the natural environment but it can mean less energy and technology required to treat the water we depend on for drinking. In some cases, once the groundwater is contaminated, it might not be possible to treat or remove the pollutant.

Septic systems can be a source of contamination if not properly maintained and regularly inspected. If a septic system isn't properly cared for, it could contaminate drinking water and the environment, put your family and neighbours' health at risk and result in an expensive repair or replacement cost.

Warning signs there could be a problem with your septic system

- Slow or backed up drains in your house
- Spongy and/or lush spots on or near the leaching bed
- A sewage smell in the basement or outside
- Poor water quality in nearby wells or surface water

Why is my septic being inspected?

If you live in Waterloo Region, you may require a municipal septic inspection under the Ontario Building Code for the purposes of drinking water source protection. A professional inspector will complete a visual inspection to identify any current or potential problems before they become severe and more costly to fix.

Septic systems, like any other equipment in your home, require regular maintenance including regular inspections. A properly maintained and functioning septic system can last 15 to 25 years and can provide a safe, reliable way of treating your household wastewater.

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As the septic system owner, you are responsible for ensuring it is functioning properly.

- Know where your tank and leaching bed are located
- Keep records of pumping, maintenance and repair
- Pump out your tank every 3 to 5 years
- Keep vehicles off your tanks and leaching beds
- Do not construct driveways, buildings or pools on or near any part of the septic system
- Follow water conservation measures
- Be careful about what goes into your septic system
- Keep trees and shrubs away from the leaching bed
- Ensure renters or guests are aware of your septic system and its proper use

Conserve water flowing to the system

Minimizing water use is key to a healthy septic system. Septic systems are designed to hold wastewater long enough to allow solids to settle to the bottom of the tank forming a sludge layer, with oil and grease floating to the top to form a scum layer. Excessive water flowing into the septic tank can cause the sludge to be disturbed, allowing the solids to pass out the tank and clog your leaching bed pipes and even your leaching bed.

- Fix leaky water fixtures such as toilet flappers and faucets
- Understand how your behaviour increases water use (e.g. shower length)
- Switch to water-efficient fixtures and appliances
- Avoid running multiple water-using appliances at the same time or back-to-back to prevent too much water from entering the system over a short period of time

Be careful about what goes into your septic system

What goes down your drain can impact your septic system, the natural environment and water quality of groundwater wells.

- Take household hazardous wastes to your municipal hazardous waste facility
- Avoid using anti-bacterial soaps, bleaches, and harsh cleaning products that kill beneficial bacteria in your tank and may cause sewage to pass through the system without proper treatment
- Look for liquid or concentrated detergents free of phosphates
- Keep household items such as wipes including wipes labelled flushable, dental floss, feminine hygiene products, condoms, diapers, food solids, hair, washing machine lint and cat litter out of your system. They can clog your leaching bed and pipes.
- Garburators should not be used on most conventional septic systems. They will fill the tank much more rapidly requiring more frequent pump-outs.

Resources

- Region of Waterloo Source Water Protection
www.regionofwaterloo.ca/sourceprotection
- Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food (OMAFRA)
www.ontario.ca/page/septic-systems
- Ontario Rural Wastewater Centre
www.ontarioruralwastewatercentre.ca/homeowner-information/

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