

Maintaining Your Septic System

A Guide for Homeowners

How your septic system works

There are two main parts to the basic septic system: the **septic tank** and **soil treatment area (STA)**. Household wastewater first flows into the septic tank, where it should stay for at least a day to allow heavy solids to settle to the bottom as sludge and grease and light solids float to the top as scum. Sludge and scum remain in the tank so that naturally occurring bacteria can break them down. But sometimes the bacteria can't finish the job and septic tanks need to be pumped out periodically.

When a septic system works properly, new wastewater from the house pushes the separated wastewater in the septic tank out into the STA, which provides additional treatment by allowing the wastewater to trickle through a filtering system composed of perforated pipes or chambers, gravel and soil. Bacteria in the soil also helps to break down the waste.

Inspections and maintenance key to a healthy system

Get your septic system inspected annually to ensure that it is working properly and to determine when the septic tank should be pumped. At this time, all compartments should be pumped. Systems that have moving parts may require more frequent inspections.

A professional contractor should do a thorough inspection. You can find a list on El Paso County Public Health's website at: www.elpasocountyhealth.org. The inspection should include:

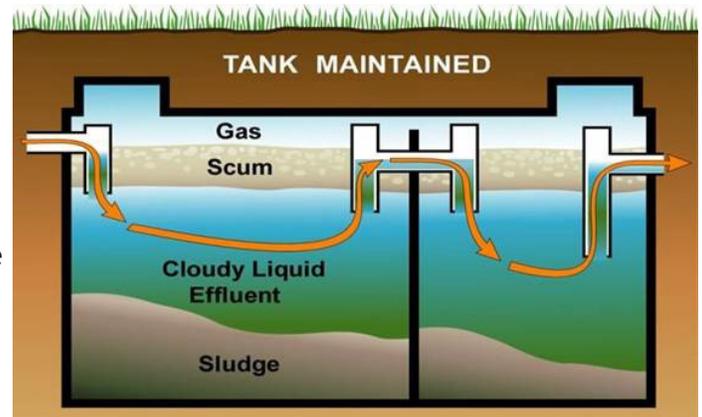
Locating the system: Even a professional may have trouble locating the system if the access to your septic tank is buried. One way to find your system is to go to the basement and determine which direction the sewer pipe is heading as it goes out through the basement wall. Back outside, the inspector will use an insulated probe inserted into the soil to locate the buried piping. Once the system components are found, be sure to sketch a map and keep it on hand to save time on future service visits. Record drawings are available online at www.land.elpasoco.com.

Uncovering the manhole and inspection ports: This may require some digging in the yard. If they are buried, it will help in future inspections if elevated access covers or risers are installed.

Checking connections: Flushing the toilets, running water in the sinks and running the washing machine through a cycle will help to determine if the household plumbing is all going to the system and working correctly.

Measuring the scum and sludge layers: The professional contractor will measure the scum and sludge layers. If the sludge depth is equal to 40 percent or more of the liquid depth, the tank should be pumped. It is recommended to conduct regular inspections and pump as recommended.

Checking the tank and soil treatment area: The inspector will check the condition of the baffles or tees and the walls of the tank for cracks, and the drainfield for any signs of failure. If the system includes a distribution box, drop box, or pump, these need to be checked, too.



Protect your septic system:

What you put into your septic system greatly affects its ability to do its job. Remember, your septic system contains living organisms that digest and treat waste. As a rule of thumb, do not dispose of anything in your septic system that can just as easily be put in the trash. The more solids that go into the tank, the more frequently the tank will need to be pumped and the higher the risk for problems.

Tips to keep your septic system working smoothly:

The Do's:

- **Do** learn the location of your septic tank and soil treatment area. Keep a sketch of it handy with your maintenance record for service visits.
- **Do** have your septic system inspected annually.
- **Do** have your septic tank pumped out by a licensed system cleaner when recommended based on scum and sludge depth.
- **Do** keep your septic tank cover accessible for inspections and pumping. Install risers if necessary.
- **Do** call a professional when you experience problems with your system or if there are any signs of failure.
- **Do** keep a detailed record of repairs, pumping, inspections, permits issued, and other maintenance activities.
- **Do** conserve water to avoid overloading the system. Be sure to repair any leaky faucets or toilets.
- **Do** divert other sources of water, like roof drains, house footing drains, and sump pumps, away from the septic system. Excessive water keeps the soil in the soil treatment area from naturally cleansing the wastewater.

The Don'ts:

- **Don't** go down into a septic tank. Toxic gases are produced by the natural treatment processes in septic tanks. Take extreme care when inspecting a septic tank, even when just looking in.
- **Don't** allow anyone to drive or park over any part of the system.
- **Don't** plant anything over or near the soil treatment area other than grass that doesn't require irrigation.
- **Don't** dig in your soil treatment area or build anything over it, and don't cover the leachfield with a hard surface such as concrete.
- **Don't** make or allow repairs to your septic system without obtaining the required permit. Use professional licensed onsite contractors when needed.
- **Don't** wash food scraps, coffee grounds, grease and cooking oil down the drain.
- **Don't** use septic tank additives. These products usually do not help, and some may even be harmful to your system.
- **Don't** use the toilet to dispose of plastics, facial tissue, dental floss, etc. Only body waste and toilet paper should be flushed down the toilet.
- **Don't** pour harmful chemicals and cleaners down the drain. Chemicals can kill the beneficial bacteria that treat your wastewater.
- **Don't** use a garbage disposal without checking with your local regulatory agency to make sure that your septic system can accommodate this additional waste.
- **Don't** allow backwash from home water softeners to enter the septic system, unless strict building codes require connection to the system.
- **Don't** allow livestock over the soil treatment area.