



Barry-Eaton District Health Department

Be Active • Be Safe • Be Healthy

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For Immediate Release

6/28/2016

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Why Maintain Your Septic System?

Everyone in our community deserves to safely enjoy swimming and fishing in our local bodies of water and to have clean drinking water. Maintaining your septic system is one thing you can do to make sure we can all do those things now and in the future. In addition to helping to keep our community and environment healthy, maintaining your septic system can also help you save money.

Maintenance Saves Money

There is an old saying that “you have to spend money to make money.” Sometimes it is also true that you have to spend money to save money. While that might sound strange, a good example of this idea sits in your driveway. If you maintain your car and replace parts as needed, it is more likely that your car will last longer and need fewer unexpected major repairs. The same idea also applies to your septic system.

Not having your septic tank inspected and pumped on a regular basis can end up shortening the life of your septic system. This could mean that you have to pay for a new system before it would otherwise be necessary. The number of people, and the amount of water they use, affects the amount of wastewater generated. This, along with the amount of solids in the wastewater (for example, food from a garbage disposal) and the size of your septic tank, affect how often it needs to be pumped. A normal household septic tank requires pumping every 3–5 years. Ignoring a septic tank that needs pumping can cause solids to go into the soil-absorption system (or drainfield) and clog it, reducing the septic system’s lifespan.

Maintenance Keeps Us Healthy

Ear and eye infections. Stomach illness. Liver infection. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), household wastewater contains bacteria, viruses, and parasites that can cause these illnesses. Well-functioning septic systems remove most of these disease-causing organisms from wastewater. Poorly maintained or nonexistent septic systems can pollute groundwater that serves as a water source. (A nonexistent septic system may have a septic tank but no drainfield. This means that untreated sewage flows directly into the ground or nearby drainage ditches, lakes, and streams.) Proper treatment of wastewater is necessary to make it safe for humans. Improperly treated sewage also poses the risk of contaminating surface water, which can harm the people (and animals!) that enjoy Michigan’s waterways.

Maintenance Protects the Environment

When it comes to wastewater, “out of sight, out of mind” is not a good way to think about the problem. Just because the wastewater goes underground does not mean that the disease-causing organisms are gone. While properly functioning septic systems keep us healthy, malfunctioning septic systems release bacteria, viruses, chemicals, and nutrient pollution that can contaminate local waterways. These pollutants can eventually enter streams, rivers, and lakes, harming local ecosystems by decreasing oxygen

and increasing nutrients, which can kill plants, fish, and other aquatic life. We want everyone to be able to enjoy Michigan's water animals and plants for a long time!

When Maintenance Isn't Enough

Even though maintenance is a critical step, it is not a cure-all. Septic systems don't last forever, and, sooner or later, you will need to replace yours. This is why the Barry-Eaton District Health Department promotes inspection of the entire septic system (both the septic tank and soil-absorption component) at the time of sale of the property to see how well the system is functioning. Depending upon the type and size of your system and your property's characteristics, evaluation might be needed more often. If you recently bought your house, you may be able to find inspection reports online at <http://bit.ly/1V24YVW>.

Make a Difference Every Day

You can do things every day to help extend the life of your septic system. By performing these daily maintenance activities, you can keep your septic system functioning for longer periods of time.

- Use your garbage disposal in the kitchen sink as little as possible—or not at all!
- Put coffee grounds, oil, fat, or food in the trash or compost bin, never down the drain.
- Do not flush feminine hygiene products, floss, paper towels, diapers, or any other non-degradable items—this includes “flushable” wipes.
- Do not drive or park on top of your septic tank or drainfield.
- Spread out your water usage. For example, don't do all of your laundry on one day—spread it throughout the week.
- Be aware that the extended use of strong medications, excessive household chemicals, and personal care products can make wastewater treatment in the septic tank less effective, so limit use of these products

Should you spend money on septic tank additives? A National Environmental Services Center newsletter offers some advice: “While many products on the market claim to help septic systems work better, the truth is there is no magic potion to cure an ailing system. In fact, most engineers and sanitation professionals believe that commercial septic system additives are, at best, useless, and at worst, harmful to a system.” According to the University of Rhode Island, chemical additives can destroy the concrete of the septic tank, and research shows that even biological additives don't make a difference in terms of pumping frequency. Further, some septic tank additives can cause solids to flow over into your soil-absorption system, which may shorten its lifespan. Most experts recommend regular septic tank pumping instead of additives.

Additional Resources Available

For more information about maintaining your septic system, see the “Septic Do's and Don'ts” at <http://bit.ly/28JQRrm> or visit www.epa.gov/septic. More resources are available on the Barry-Eaton District Health Department website at www.barryeatonhealth.org or by visiting or calling one of its offices.

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Sources:

EPA SepticSmart : <http://www.epa.gov/septic>

National Environmental Services Center: http://www.nesc.wvu.edu/pdf/ww/septic/pl_fall04.pdf

University of Rhode Island: https://cfpub.epa.gov/npstbx/files/RI_pumpout.pdf