



Barry-Eaton District Health Department

Be Active • Be Safe • Be Healthy

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How Your Septic System Works

What is a septic system?

The Barry-Eaton District Health Department (BEDHD) often gets questions and confusion from residents who don't know much about their on-site septic system. "People call all the time and don't know what they have for a septic system," says Michelle Henry, BEDHD Environmental Health secretary. "Sometimes they moved from a place that has [city] sewer, but sometimes they just haven't ever thought about it."

What are septic systems?

Septic systems, also called on-site sewage systems, are underground wastewater treatment structures commonly used in rural areas. They use a combination of nature and technology to treat household wastewater. A typical septic system consists of a septic tank and a soil absorption component (usually a drainbed or drainfield). Untreated sewage contains disease-causing organisms such as bacteria, viruses, and parasites, but once sewage is properly treated, it is safe to be introduced to groundwater and surface water.

The primary purpose of the septic tank is to separate solids and oils from liquids. Its secondary function is to slowly break down organic matter.

Soil-based systems release the liquid sewage from the septic tank into a series of pipes with holes that are buried in a drainfield, drainbed, or other special unit designed to slowly release the sewage into the soil. Natural bacteria break down the potentially harmful organisms in wastewater.

How a typical septic system works:

1. All water runs out of your house from one main drainage pipe into a septic tank, a buried, water-tight container usually made of concrete.
2. The septic tank holds wastewater long enough for solids to settle to the bottom and for grease to float to the top. An outlet device (baffle) prevents the solids and greases from leaving the tank and traveling into the soil absorption area.
3. Liquid wastewater then exits the tank into the drainfield. Each time water leaves the house, water also leaves the septic tank. For example, flushing a toilet that holds 1.6 gallons of water means that 1.6 gallons of liquid wastewater in the septic tank flow into the drainfield.
4. The drainfield, or soil absorption area, is a shallow, buried area usually made up of pipes and stone. Wastewater moves through the piping into porous surfaces, which allows the wastewater to slowly filter into the soil.
5. Finally, the wastewater trickles down into the oxygen-rich soil, which naturally reduces harmful coliform bacteria, viruses, and nutrients.

Do you have a septic system?

If you live a rural area, the odds are good that you have a septic system. The biggest sign is if you do not pay a monthly sewer bill! However, knowing that your wastewater goes “somewhere” is only the first step. Many homes do not have any kind of treatment for wastewater after it leaves the septic tank, which means that untreated sewage is released into our groundwater and surface water. BEDHD identifies many of these homes without sewage treatment systems through the Time of Sale or Transfer (TOST) program, but unless a house is being sold, the problem can go undetected for years. To be a good neighbor and help ensure a healthy environment for everyone, make sure that you investigate and monitor your sewage system.

How to find your septic system:

Once you have determined that you have a septic system, you can find it by:

- Looking at BEDHD records.
- Checking your yard for lids and manhole covers.
- Contacting a septic inspector or pumper to help you locate it.
- Searching the TOST reports on <http://bit.ly/1V24YVW> if your house was purchased within the last few years.

Additional resources available:

For more information about septic systems, visit <http://www.epa.gov/septic>. Local resources are also available on the BEDHD website at <http://www.barryeatonhealth.org/services/environmentalhealth> or by visiting or calling one of the BEDHD offices.

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