



Barry-Eaton District Health Department

Be Active • Be Safe • Be Healthy

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What to Do if Your Septic System Fails

Septic (sewage) systems treat household wastewater to make it safe for disposal into the environment. Before being treated by a properly designed and functioning septic system, household wastewater contains harmful germs, including bacteria, viruses, worms, and parasites. After wastewater is treated by a well-designed and functioning septic system, most of the germs are killed. What remains is mostly water, which is slowly released back into the ground. If a septic system has failed or is not working properly, wastewater passing through the system might not be treated completely before it is released. This means that it can contaminate groundwater and surface water, which is a danger to public health.

Why Septic Systems Fail

Septic systems can fail for many reasons:

- **They are old and have outlived their lifetime.** A septic system is like a roof. Nobody expects their roof to last forever, and maintenance, including eventual replacement, is unavoidable. The average life of a septic system is about 30 years. The lifetime can be much shorter if a septic system is not maintained properly or is misused. On the other hand, a septic system can sometimes last longer if it is well maintained.
- **They are not properly maintained.** One maintenance issue that can cause system failure is not pumping a septic tank often enough. This causes solids in the tank to build up and eventually flow out of the tank and into the final disposal. This can overload the system's ability to treat the wastewater. Eventually, the entire system can become clogged with solids and require complete replacement.
- **They are not properly designed.** For many decades, the Barry-Eaton District Health Department (BEDHD) has had codes and design requirements for new septic systems. However, many systems have been constructed without permits and/or any BEDHD involvement. Some of these systems were not designed or built properly. For example, many are too small, or they are built on sites with poorly drained soils or high groundwater tables.
- **The drainfield is overloaded.** This can happen if too much water is used inside the home or if a leaky septic tank allows groundwater to leak into the tank and flood the system.
- **There is structural damage to the septic tank or crushed pipes in the drainfield.** This includes roots from trees or shrubs plugging the drainfield pipes.

How to Tell if Your Septic System Is Failing

Failing septic systems are not always obvious. The following are some signs of system trouble:

- **Drain and toilet issues.** If you have slow drains or if toilets flush more slowly, it could be a sign of system failure. Sewage backing up in drains or toilets is also a sign. (However, this could also be a sign of plumbing issues.)

- **Unusual yard conditions.** Wet areas in the lawn around your septic system could mean that wastewater is coming to the surface. This happens when the soil becomes clogged and can no longer handle wastewater from the septic system. Very green grass around your system is also a sign of system overload.
- **Unusual growth of weeds or algae in bodies of surface water around your property.**
- **Unpleasant smells around your home and property.** This can sometimes be a sign of septic system problems. (This could also be a sign of plumbing issues.)

A septic system can still be failing or near failure even if a home has no obvious signs of problems. Often, the only way to know that a septic system has failed or is near failure is to have it carefully inspected.

What to Do if You See Signs of System Failure

If you think that your septic system has failed or is having problems, you should call BEDHD right away. BEDHD will help you determine what to do next. If wastewater is coming up in your yard, make sure the area is fenced off so that no one—including pets—will come into contact with it.

If it is determined that you need a new system, you will have to apply to BEDHD for a permit for a replacement septic system. When BEDHD receives your application, we will schedule an appointment for a sanitarian to visit your home. During the appointment, the sanitarian will evaluate the soil on your property. This will help the sanitarian determine the best septic system design for your home and find the best location on your property for it. Once BEDHD issues a permit, you will hire a contractor to install your new system. After installation, a sanitarian will visit your property again to ensure that your new system was installed correctly and fully meets the BEDHD Sanitary Code.

What to Do if Your Basement Floods

If sewage from your plumbing or septic system backs up into your basement, avoid coming into contact with the sewage. Raw sewage can contain germs that are harmful to your health. Contact BEDHD and visit <http://bit.ly/291DksZ> for clean-up instructions.

Who to Contact for More Help and Information

Contact BEDHD at (269) 945-9516 (Barry County office) or (517) 543-2430 (Eaton County office). For more information on septic systems, visit <http://bit.ly/1LquswE>. For commonly requested forms, including applications for sewage system permits, visit <http://bit.ly/1Np0IjP>.

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Sources:

<https://www.epa.gov/septic/what-do-if-your-septic-system-fails>

<http://www.baycounty-mi.gov/docs/citizencorps/whattodoifyoursepticsystemfails.pdf>