

HOW OFTEN TO PUMP YOUR SEPTIC TANK

If your home is connected to an onsite wastewater treatment and disposal system, you have a septic tank. The septic tank is a watertight concrete or plastic tank that is buried in the ground outside your home that will hold at least 1000 gallons of wastewater. Most homes have larger tanks. The septic tank has wastewater from the house flowing into it, the heavier solid materials settle to the bottom and the lighter greases and fats float to the top. The liquid flows out to the disposal system such as a lateral field, sand filter, mound, or mechanical aerobic unit.

After a few years, the solids that accumulate in the septic tank need to be pumped out and disposed at an approved location. If not removed, these solids will eventually overflow, accumulate in the lateral field, clog the soil and require an expensive repair to the septic system. Pumping the septic tank on a regular basis will allow the disposal system to perform as expected much longer.

If the disposal system can no longer function properly, the sewage effluent will back up into your home or flow across the ground surface. Pumping the septic tank at this time will not rejuvenate the disposal system but will only provide a few days of reprieve until the tank fills up again.

The frequency with which you will need to pump depends on three variables: the size of your tank, the volume of your wastewater and the solids content of your wastewater. If you are unsure about when to have the tank pumped, observe the yearly rate of solid accumulation. The tank should be pumped if the sludge layer has built up to within 25 to 33 percent of the liquid capacity of the tank. Therefore, a typical 1250 gallon tank with four feet liquid capacity should be pumped when the solids are one to one and a half feet thick in the bottom of the tank. If the tank is not easily accessible, you may wish to inspect and pump according to the frequency guideline in the following table.

When inspecting the tank, check the tee or outlet baffle to be sure it is in place and keeping solids from flowing into the disposal system. Also, make sure to have both compartments of the tank pumped.

If the septic tank is not used very often, such as for a vacation home, it will not need to be pumped as often as shown in the table. If you use a garbage disposal, the tank will need to be pumped more frequently. After a few inspections, you should be able to adjust the schedule according to the rate at which solids accumulate.

ESTIMATED SEPTIC TANK INSPECTION AND PUMPING FREQUENCY (YEARS)					
Tank Size (in gallons)	Number of People Using the System				
	1	2	4	6	8
1000	12	6	3	2	1
1250	16	8	3	2	1
1500	19	9	4	3	2

For a list of state certified pumpers, call Warren County Environmental Health at 515-961-1065.

[This information was taken from the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service publication "Septic Systems and Their Maintenance" 1994]