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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (CONT.)

What is a septic system?

A septic system is a small-scale wastewater treatment plant that you own and operate. It treats and disposes of all the wastewater generated in your home or business.

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How do septic systems work?

A typical septic system has a [septic tank](#) and a [drainfield](#).

The septic tank separates solid materials from the liquid portion of the wastewater. The tank stores the solids while the liquids flow to the drainfield. The solids are reduced in volume in the tank by bacterial action. Eventually, the settled solids at the bottom of the tank (sludge) and floating solids at the surface of the tank (scum) fill too much of the tank volume and the tank must be pumped out to restart the cycle.

The drainfield is where liquid wastewater is treated and absorbed into the soil. Bacteria and other tiny organisms in the soil consume bacteria and viruses; plants use nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus in the wastewater to grow; and soil particles act like a sieve to filter out some of the waste. The cleaned-up wastewater then soaks into the ground and joins the groundwater below.

Some septic systems use a [pump](#) to reach better soil for wastewater treatment. Other systems, called [mounds](#), bring in soils from a different location to build the drainfield. Systems like [sand filters](#), [aerobic treatment units](#), and [Glendon BioFilters](#) provide enhanced treatment to better clean up wastewater on sites with poor soils or a high water table. These specialized systems require extra care and maintenance in exchange for the higher level of wastewater treatment they provide.

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How do I find out where my septic system is located?

We may have a construction drawing (called an “as-built”) of your system on file, which will show you where the various parts of the system are located. [Click here](#) or leave a message at 253-798-6577 with your address and we will look for your as-built. If we do not have an as-built for your system, you should be able to find the septic tank by probing with a steel rod gently tapped into the ground, starting five feet from where the sanitary sewer leaves your house. It is important to know where the drainfield is, as well, so you don’t park on it, pave over it, graze animals on it, or do anything else that could compromise its ability to treat your wastewater.

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Why do septic systems fail?

Septic systems do not last indefinitely, and eventually even the most well taken care of system will fail when the treatment properties of the soil in the drainfield have been exhausted. A system may also fail due to poor design or installation in unsuitable soils. More often than not, though, a failing system is caused by homeowner misuse:

- **Overloading the system with too much water** – Septic tanks function by allowing solids to float and settle, so that relatively “clean” water from the middle layer of the tank is sent to the drainfield for further treatment. By sending too much water through the system (by washing all

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (CONT.)

your loads of laundry in one day, for example) you could be pushing solids into the drainfield before they have a chance to settle out. This can clog up drainfield components, leading to early system failure.

- **Using a garbage disposal when the system was not designed for it** – In addition to sending lots of extra water into the septic tank, food waste does not settle or degrade well in the tank and will increase the need for more frequent pumping.
- **Disposing of garbage in the system** – items that should go in the trash like dental floss, feminine hygiene products, condoms, diapers, cotton swabs, cigarette butts, coffee grounds, cooking fats, bones, cat litter, and paper towels won't degrade in the tank and will increase the need for more frequent pumping. Trash can also clog inlets, outlets, and drainfield components.
- **Overuse of chemicals** – Harsh cleaning chemicals and other household chemicals can kill the bacteria in your septic tank. While they should bounce back quickly after your cleaning session, a safer option for your septic system, your family, and the environment is to try some of these [green cleaning recipes](#).

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What are some signs of a failing system?

Some signs of a failing septic system are foul odors inside or outside your house, gurgling sounds in the plumbing, sewage on the ground or soft, spongy spots in your drainfield, and/or sewage backing up into your house. By the time you see these symptoms the damage may already be done, which is why regular inspections and pumping are so important.

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Who do I contact if I'm having a problem with my system?

To determine the problem, contact a certified septic tank pumping company, operation and maintenance specialist, installation company or designer/engineer for an initial assessment. You can find a list of certified companies [here](#). Once the problem has been identified, hire the appropriate professional to fix the problem. A designer is involved if the system has to be relocated or replaced with a new type of system. An installer's role is the construction of the system. A pumper primarily pumps and repairs the septic tank.

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Do I need a permit to repair my system?

If a designer or installer is needed, a Health Department [permit](#) must be obtained.

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Where can I go for financial assistance if my septic system needs to be repaired?

Repairing or replacing a system can be very costly, but is important for public health and the environment. There may be assistance; contact the following programs to find out if you qualify for money that may be available: Pierce County Housing Repair Program at 253-798-7038, City of

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (CONT.)

Tacoma Community Development Department at 253-597-5219, USDA Rural Development at 253-845-0553 extension 102. For more information on these programs, click [here](#).

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Do septic systems cause health or water quality problems?

Septic systems that are properly planned, designed, sited, installed, operated and maintained provide excellent wastewater treatment. When septic systems are not properly planned, designed, sited, installed, operated, and/or maintained, there is a potential for problems. Surface water, including shellfish beds and swimming beaches, can be contaminated with disease-causing bacteria and nitrates from failing septic systems. Even if you do not live on the water, a failing septic system can contaminate the groundwater – the same water your drinking water well might draw from. Surfacing sewage in your yard is also a health concern for children and pets.

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Why aren't there sewers in my neighborhood?

There may be sewer service in your area but your home or business was built before the sewers became available. Look in the street for manhole covers labeled "Sewer". If you see these, it may mean that sewer service is available to you when you need it. Contact your local city or county sewer utility if you need to know if sewer service is available to your property.

If sewers are not available in your neighborhoods, it could be for one of several reasons. One of the most common reasons is that it is simply not economical; that is, the cost to extend sewer lines into your area may greatly exceed the estimated benefit. It may also be that sewers are prohibited by your local land-use plan as approved by your city or county government. Some areas are designated rural and have strict prohibitions on extension of sewers into the area. If you wish to know whether sewers are proposed to come to your neighborhood, contact your local city or county sewer utility.

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What can I do to keep my septic system working well?

Keep your septic system F.I.T. by Finding it, Inspecting it, and Taking care of it.

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Find it – Know where your septic system is located, so you can maintain it and protect it. We may have a construction drawing (called an "as-built") of your system on file, which will show you where the various parts of the system are located. Click [here](#) to request a copy of your as-built, or call and leave a message at 253-798-6577 with your address. If we do not have an as-built for your system, you should be able to find the septic tank by probing with a steel rod gently tapped into the ground, starting five feet from where the sanitary sewer leaves your house. It is important to know where the drainfield is, as well, so you don't park on it, pave over it, graze animals on it, or do anything else that could compromise its ability to treat your wastewater.

Inspect it – Once you know where your system is, you should periodically inspect it to make sure it's working properly. Most septic systems should be inspected at least once every three years. Some

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (CONT.)

systems with complex components, like air pumps and ultraviolet light disinfection, need to be inspected at least annually by a certified professional.

You can check your septic tank yourself, but we don't recommend you perform an inspection on any components with electrical power. We suggest you leave inspection of electrical components and complicated controls to a certified professional. Find one [here](#).

Take care of it – There are some simple things you can do every day to help keep your system working properly and extend its working life. Conserving water, reducing your use of harsh cleaning chemicals, and limiting the types of items that go down the drain are just a few examples. Click [here](#) to read more tips to keep your septic system F.I.T.

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Are there items I should not put down the drain if my house has a septic system?

Don't use a garbage disposal unless you have confirmed your system was approved to handle the additional waste. Don't use your septic system as a trash can – don't put dental floss, feminine hygiene products, condoms, diapers, cotton swabs, cigarette butts, coffee grounds, cooking fats, bones, cat litter, or paper towels into your system. These items won't degrade in the tank, and will increase the need for more frequent pumping. They can also clog inlets, outlets, and drainfield components. Don't pour latex paint, pesticides, or other hazardous chemicals into your system or use caustic drain openers for a clogged drain – try boiling water or a drain snake to open clogs instead.

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How often should I have the septic system inspected?

Have your system inspected by a licensed professional at least every three years, or contact us at 253-798-4788 and we can send you a brochure detailing how to inspect your septic tank yourself. We don't recommend you perform an inspection on any components with electrical power. We suggest you leave inspection of electrical components and complicated controls to a certified professional. Find one [here](#).

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What should an inspection of my septic system include?

A septic tank inspection helps you determine whether or not your septic tank needs to be pumped by measuring the sludge and scum levels. If the bottom of the scum layer is within 3 inches of the bottom of the outlet [baffle](#), or the top of the sludge layer is within 12 inches of the outlet baffle, your tank needs to be pumped.

If your septic system has other components, such as a pump tank, sand filter or an aerobic treatment unit, these components need to be inspected as well. Your certified inspector should open the pump tank, or pump riser lid on the sand filter, to determine if the pump is working properly, if the high water alarm works in case of a pump malfunction, and if the tank or sand filter containment liner is intact and not leaking.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (CONT.)

If the system has an aerobic treatment unit, an individual certified on that brand-name unit must inspect this specialty component.

Finally, a septic system inspection should include an examination of the disposal area. If the disposal area has monitoring ports, the inspector should look into them and determine if the absorption area looks okay. If there are no inspection ports, he or she will examine the area for wet spots, wetland vegetation growth, or other signs of problems.

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How often should I have the septic system pumped?

A general rule is every three to five years, but this will vary based on the size of your tank, number of people in your household, and whether you are using a garbage disposal when the system was not designed for it or disposing of garbage in the system. If you have your septic tank inspected and the bottom of the scum layer is within 3 inches of the bottom of the outlet [baffle](#), or the top of the sludge layer is within 12 inches of the outlet baffle, your tank needs to be pumped. When your tank is pumped, the pumper should pump it out completely – it is not necessary to leave any sludge as “starter” to reactivate the tank. Your pumper will rinse down the inside of the tank and inspect it for cracks, inspect the [baffles](#) and any filters or pumps, and re-fill your tank with fresh water. Check out the [Pumping Your Septic Tank brochure](#).

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Should I use additives?

The short answer is No. Washington Sea Grant Water Quality Specialist Teri King explains it best in her excellent booklet “[Septic Sense, Scents, Cents: 3 Supreme Insights to the Fearless Flush](#)”: “A common myth is that septic tank additives will break down the sludge in your tank so it never needs to be pumped. This is false. Septic tank additives are unnecessary since *you* contain everything needed to inoculate your septic tank with bacteria. Instead of spending money on expensive additives that are little more than dried bacteria, take yourself and your spouse out to dinner and come home.”

“If the additive claims to contain the bacteria you need to augment your septic tank’s bacterial load, remember that milk carton you left out on the counter a while back. After leaving the half-full carton on the counter all day, it was bulging. In fact, it was teeming with bacteria that had generated on their own when conditions were suitable. If your septic tank could handle more bacteria, it would make them. Adding a little container of this or that is not going to help shift the balance of bacteria in your tank. If your septic system professional says you have a sick tank, have the tank pumped and start again.”

Most importantly, “In Washington State, makers of septic tank additives are required to prove the products do not harm the environment. They are not, however, required to prove they are effective.”

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (CONT.)

Who can I contact for more information about septic systems?

Contact us here at the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department. Leave a message for us at 253-798-4788 or send an email message to SepticInfo@tpchd.org. The National Small Flows Clearinghouse has a Technical Assistance Hotline you can call toll free at 1-800-624-8301. You can also link to some web sites with good information from our [links](#) page.

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Are there organizations that can assist me and/or my community in addressing on-site wastewater problems?

The National Small Flows Clearinghouse has a Technical Assistance Hotline you can call toll free at 1-800-624-8301. The Rural Community Assistance Program provides assistance to communities having problems with their septic systems. You can call them toll free at 1-888-321-7227. If your septic system is on an easement, or a neighbor has an easement on your property, and you are having trouble with your neighbor, you might want to call the Pierce County Center for Dispute Resolution at 253-572-3657 or email them at Clientservices@pccdr.org. You can always call us here at the Health Department and leave a message at 253-798-4788 for more information.

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