

Signs of Septic System Failure or Malfunction



- Water and sewage from toilets, drains, and sinks are backing up into the home
- Bathtubs, showers, and sinks drain very slowly
- Gurgling sounds in the plumbing system
- Standing water or damp spots near the septic tank or drainfield, especially if black in color
- Bad odors around the septic tank or drainfield
- Bright green, spongy lush grass over the septic tank or drainfield, even during dry weather
- Algal blooms in nearby ponds or lakes
- High levels of nitrates or coliform bacteria in water wells

Like most components of your home, septic systems require routine maintenance. If maintained, a septic system should provide reliable service for many years. If the septic system isn't maintained, owners run the risk of dangerous and costly failures. All septic systems do have an operational lifetime and will eventually need to be replaced, but the best way to protect your family and investment is to take care of your system.

A failed or malfunctioning septic system is a risk to human and animal health and can pollute the environment. A responsible septic owner is alert to the signs of failure, regardless of the age of the system, and responds quickly when any are discovered. A quick response may save the owner money in repairs and may prevent illness and negative impacts on the environment.

What happens when a septic system fails?

A septic system failure causes untreated sewage to be released where it shouldn't be. Sewage may come to the surface of the ground around the tank or drainfield, or back-up indoors. The sewage could also find its way into groundwater, surface water, or marine water without us ever seeing it. Sewage carries pathogens and other dangerous contaminants that can make people and animals sick. These contaminants can make ground and surface water sources unsafe for drinking, swimming, shellfish harvesting, and agricultural uses.

What are some common reasons a septic system doesn't work properly?

Clogging. When the pipe from the house to the tank is clogged, fixtures drain very slowly (perhaps slower on lower levels of the building) or stop draining completely. This is often an easy problem to fix. Usually, a service provider can "snake the line" and get it unclogged. You can prevent a clogged line by flushing only human waste and toilet paper down the drain and having your system inspected annually. Sometimes this pipe gets crushed or broken by vehicle or animal traffic. Plant roots sometimes block the pipe (particularly on older systems). Fixing a crushed or root damaged pipe will require replacing (at least) a portion of the pipe. Other times clogging occurs in the soil of the drainfield over time, for example, when tank pumping is not done regularly. This is a much more serious issue and will likely require system replacement.



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