

Wollongong Council contains some unsewered areas including parts of West Dapto, Darkes Forest, Coalcliff and Stanwell Park. It is essential that proper treatment and reuse of wastewater in these unsewered areas is achieved to ensure minimal impact on public health and the environment. Septic systems play an important role in this respect.

What is a Septic System?

The Septic System enables people living in unsewered areas to treat and dispose of their sewage and liquid wastes. A Septic System consists of a structurally sound watertight tank which then connects with a form of disposal such as soil absorption, transpiration beds, irrigation area, or a collection well which is regularly emptied by a contractor's pump out tanker.

All the wastewaters from a household generally discharge into the septic tank where most of the solids settle to the bottom and are retained in the tank forming a sludge layer, whilst fats and greases collect at the top in a scum layer. Bacteria in the septic tank break down the solid matter in the sludge and scum layers. Material that cannot be fully broken down gradually builds up in the tank and this sludge must be pumped out periodically.

There are currently two ways to treat septic tank effluent:

- 1 *On-site application* – The effluent flows from the septic tank to evapo-transpiration and/or absorption trenches or irrigation areas. Here the effluent is mainly absorbed into the soil and partly evaporated by the sun and used by vegetation. On site application systems have the potential to contaminate groundwater and are not recommended in sensitive locations or in higher density developments unless detailed study by a soil scientist is first undertaken to demonstrate that the site proposed is suitable for the application.
- 2 *Pump out* – The effluent flows from the septic tank into a collection well or holding tank. At regular periods, a tanker pumps out the holding tank and transports the effluent to an off-site management facility, e.g. sewer disposal point.

Any proposed septic system requires approval from Wollongong Council before it is put in place to ensure it is installed according to specifications and any special conditions, and is maintained and serviced correctly.

Care of the septic tank is only a part of the maintenance of your septic system. Management of the treated wastewater from your septic system is your responsibility.

Maintaining your Septic System

The effectiveness of the system will, in part, depend on how it is operated and maintained. The following is a guide on how to achieve the most from your system.

DO

- ✓ have your septic tank desludged every three years to prevent sludge buildup, which may 'clog' the pipes and absorption trenches
- ✓ have your septic tank serviced annually by contractors to check scum and sludge levels, and the presence of blockages in the outlet and inlet pipes
- ✓ have your grease trap (if installed) cleaned out at least every two months.
- ✓ keep a record of pump outs, inspections and other maintenance
- ✓ learn the location and layout of your septic system and land application area
- ✓ check household products for suitability for use with a septic tank
- ✓ use biodegradable liquid detergents, such as concentrates with low phosphorus
- ✓ ensure your tank is mosquito-proofed
- ✓ conserve water

DON'T

- X put large quantities of bleaches, disinfectants, whiteners, nappy soakers, chemicals and spot removers into your septic tank via the sink, washing machine or toilet
- X allow any materials such as nappies, sanitary napkins, condoms and other hygiene products to enter the system.
- X use more than the recommended amounts of detergents
- X put fats and oils down the drain and keep food waste out of your system
- X install or use a garbage grinder or spa bath if your system is not designed for it

Conservative water usage will lessen the likelihood of problems such as overloading of your septic system. Overloading may result in wastewater backing up into your house, contamination of your yard with improperly treated effluent, and effluent from your system contaminating groundwater or any nearby waterway.

Your septic system is also unable to cope with the input of sudden large volumes of water such as several showers or loads of washing over a short period of time. You should try to avoid these 'shock loads' by ensuring water use is spread more evenly throughout the day and week.

Warning Signs

By looking out for the following warning signs and attending to them immediately, you can protect your health and the environment:

- Water that drains too slowly from waste fittings in the house
- Drain pipes that gurgle or make noises when air bubbles are forced back through the system
- Sewage smells
- Wastewater surfacing over the land application area/s

If there are odours present check:

- Grease trap (if installed), is it full or blocked?
- Land application area, is it wet and soggy:
- Has there been recent heavy rain?

A poorly maintained septic tank is a potentially serious source of water pollution and may present health risks. It will cause odours and attract vermin and insects. By looking after your septic system you can do your part in helping to protect the environment and the health of you and your family.

Disclaimers

This Fact Sheet was believed to be correct at the date of its publication.

This Fact Sheet is for general information purposes only and should not be relied upon for legal advice.