

# Onsite Wastewater Systems Frequently Asked Questions

## 1. What is a septic system?

Septic systems, also known as onsite wastewater systems, are a series of components exterior to a building designed to transport, store, and discharge wastewater in an environmentally conscious manner. Typically, septic systems are required in communities not connected to a municipal sewer, or if the property is greater than 300 feet to the nearest potential sewer connection.

For residential homes, there are two types of systems:

A **conventional system** will have four main components:

- **Building sewer:** The pipe that carries wastewater from the house to the septic tank.
- **Septic tank:** Constructed of concrete, plastic, or fiberglass. Wastewater will flow into this tank and settle naturally, separating solids from liquids. The liquids then flow through an outlet on the opposite end of the tank.
- **Effluent sewer:** A nonperforated pipe that carries wastewater from the tank to the drainfield. These can be pressurized, using a pump tank if the drainfield is uphill from the septic tank.
- **Drainfield:** This is the point where the wastewater contacts the external environment of the wastewater system. There are many types of drainfields, based on the considerations for each individual lot. The most common types are standard, deep wall, and chambered trenches. The wastewater exits a perforated pipe or a plastic chamber, and filters through several feet of gravel or native soils.

An **alternative system** is another type of system where the wastewater undergoes a type of treatment prior to disposal. They allow for a downsizing of the system, due to the water being “cleaner” at the disposal point. The most common reason for placing an alternative system is when a conventional system is not feasible. However, some choose to install an alternative system because of the advanced nature of its wastewater treatment and disposal.

## 2. I don't know where my septic system is; how can I find it?

Many septic systems were installed prior to regulation by the Utah Onsite Wastewater Rule R317-4. Today, before any new systems are buried, a health department official will create a drawing called an “as-built” that locates the tank and drainfield in relation to the structure it serves using measurements from points on the building's foundation to the center of the tank. These drawings are available by completing a Government Records Access and Management Act (GRAMA) request. Request forms are available on the [Salt Lake County Health Department website](#).

If there are no records available for your system, the health department recommends you contact an onsite system professional or a pump company to locate the tank. Once you have located the tank, marking the location is helpful so you remember where it is if you need to access it again.

**We do NOT recommend attempting to locate your tank without professional assistance or guidance.** Digging up your yard to save money can risk damaging septic system components. Professionals often use noninvasive tools to locate tanks, and their experience is invaluable.

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### 3. What can I flush down my toilet?

A properly functioning septic system contains natural organisms to digest and treat waste. We recommend that you only flush wastewater and toilet paper. These are the only two things that are properly broken down and separated, allowing a scum layer to form on the upper liquid layer and sludge to accumulate at the bottom of the tank. The liquids are sent to the drainfield, while the sludge and scum are left to break down. Not all the solids can be broken down, and they can accumulate in the tank over time. You should pump your tank often enough to remove the solids and ensure proper function. The health department recommends that septic tanks be pumped and serviced every 3-5 years to properly maintain the life of the system.

### 4. What should I avoid flushing down my toilet?

The same common sense methods you would use in a home connected to the public sewer system apply to a septic system. Do not use the toilet to dispose of plastics, paper towels, sanitary products, disposable diapers, kitty litter, dental floss, or anything that isn't toilet paper or wastewater. In the kitchen, do not dispose of oils/grease, egg shells, coffee grounds, or other food scraps. These products do not break down properly and can clog pipes and drainfields, resulting in costly repairs to your system.

Certain types of liquids can wreak havoc on a septic system, as well. Household cleaners, disinfection products, and detergents—when used incorrectly or in excess—can kill the vital bacteria in the tank and disrupt the breakdown of solids. Never dispose of hazardous chemicals or pharmaceuticals in your toilet or sink. Although your drainfield provides some filtration and natural treatment of the wastewater, excessive pollutants can leach into the soil and contaminate ground and surface water. [Salt Lake County has many resources available locally for proper disposal of these products](#), and most of them are free for residents.

### 5. What regular maintenance should I be doing to keep my septic system healthy?

First, follow the guidelines of what to flush and not flush, and make sure a professional services the tank every 3-5 years. Keep documentation of pump records, tank locations, and any notes about your system that may be relevant to future maintenance.

**Septic system additives and cleaners:** While there are many of these products on the market, both biological and chemical additives for septic systems have not been shown to positively affect system performance. The health department and most professionals agree that these products have not been thoroughly evaluated and are ineffective, at best, and harmful to a septic system, at worst. Some have the potential to degrade septic system components and leach into the soils, contaminating groundwater. Proper use and maintenance of a septic system should prevent the need to add anything to your septic tank other than normal wastewater and toilet paper.

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## 6. What are the warning signs that my septic system isn't working properly?

**Inside the home:** The most common sign of septic system malfunction or failure is a sewage backup into the home. Many places from the drains to the drainfield can become clogged, affecting the performance of the system. If you have multiple tanks, knowing where each drain is plumbed to is useful in determining problems. When in doubt about the condition of your system, consult with a professional.

**Outside the home:** If you notice water surfacing on your property, it may indicate there are problems in the drainfield of your septic system. Note the time of year and the weather. If it hasn't rained recently and there's water in your yard, contact a professional to investigate.

## 7. Is there anything else I should know?

If you decide to do any work on your home, we recommend contacting the health department prior to starting the project. At the very least, you will want to know where your system is located so construction efforts do not damage it. Many tanks are not able to endure heavy driving loads from construction equipment and drainfields can get compacted or paved over, negatively affecting their ability to function.

If you are remodeling or building a new home, the size of your system will depend on the nature of your project, and the requirements can range from not changing your system at all to designing a new onsite wastewater system. Although we address each case individually, all systems are required to meet the state wastewater rule, health department regulations, and applicable local ordinances.

The best resource for further knowledge of septic systems regulations is a Salt Lake County Health Department inspector licensed as an Onsite Wastewater Professional. You can reach us at 385-468-3862.

## 8. What other resources exist online?

- [Utah Rule R317-4 Onsite Wastewater Systems](#)
- [Utah Department of Environmental Quality Wastewater Webpage](#)
- [Salt Lake County Health Department Onsite Wastewater Systems Program](#)
- [Salt Lake County Health Department Regulations](#)