

# *Jasper County Homeowner's Maintenance Guide for Septic Systems*

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## **Septic system maintenance is the property owner's responsibility**

*Taking a couple of minutes to read this can literally save you thousands of dollars and give you the knowledge to do a good job of maintaining your system.* When properly designed, constructed, and maintained, your septic system will provide long-term effective treatment of household wastewater. There is no such thing as a maintenance free system. If your system isn't maintained, you or future owners will pay the cost. Lateral fields must be protected, the effluent filter must be kept free flowing and septic tanks need to be pumped. If you are unsure or have questions about your septic system, please contact this department or a local septic contractor.

## **6 Simple Steps to Protect Your Septic System**

1. **Know what you have.** Keep a copy of your final inspection report with your important papers. (For existing systems, if you don't have a map and diagram of your system contact our office. If the system was installed under a permit in Jasper County, Iowa after 1971 we usually have one. )
2. **Put someone in charge.** Every household should designate someone to keep tabs on the wastewater system and what goes into it. If your drains are slow check the effluent filter. The effluent filter must be checked and rinsed 1 to 2 times a year depending on the usage. Walk the lateral field and make corrections or adjustments as needed. A common sign to see that your distribution box is in need of adjustment is to locate your lateral lines and see if there are uneven green lines in the yard of where the laterals lines are located. Uneven green lines will show that there is not equal water flow down each line. It is important the lateral lines are getting equal amounts of water down each line to maximize the life of your system.
3. **Pump your tank.** Septic tanks need to be pumped out every 3 to 5 years depending on usage. There is no additive which you can use to avoid pumping. Keep the tank accesses secure. There are deaths every year in the U.S. from falls into septic tanks. Sludge doesn't dissolve away on its own. Tanks are for settling capacity, the more room the sludge fills the less settling capacity, less settling equals a higher potential of suspended solids going out to plug your laterals.
4. **Use water efficiently.**
  - Conserve water and fix leaking fixtures
  - Run the dishwasher and clothes washer only when they're full.
  - Make sure all faucets are completely turned off when not in use
  - Maintain your plumbing to eliminate leaks
  - Install aerators in the faucets in your kitchen and bathroom
5. **Watch what you flush and what you put down your drains.**
  - No household hazardous wastes, baby wipes, paper towels, feminine hygiene products, condoms, cigarette butts, or paint in your system. Dental floss, feminine hygiene products, condoms, diapers, cotton swabs, coffee grounds, cat litter, paper towels should not go down the drain. Gasoline, oil, pesticides, antifreeze and paint can stress or destroy the biological treatment taking place in the system or might contaminate surface waters and groundwater.
  - Avoid excessive use of products like antibacterial soaps, bleach, grease or oils. There will be some grease and oil from cooking but never dispose of these intentionally down the drain.
  - If you use a garbage disposal, you will be putting more solids into the tank that will have to be pumped out. Consider a compost pile to limit the use of the disposal.
  - Liquid laundry detergents are recommended over powdered detergent which may contain fillers.
  - Some pharmaceuticals and medical procedures like dialysis or chemotherapy may cause problems with your septic system. In these cases, there may not be anything you can do, other than understand the reason, do the best can do and you might have to have the tank pumped more frequently. Flushing old medication into a system for disposal is not recommended.
  - **A word about toilet paper** – To avoid problems, it should break down and settle out easily if you put a few squares in a jar of water and shake it. "Septic safe" on the label is not a definable standard; it is advertising. Quilted and/or products with lotion may increase the scum layer and sludge in your tank. Either avoid them or simply recognize your choice may increase tank maintenance frequency. It is your choice and your maintenance.
6. **Care for your lateral field.** Know where it is. Walk the lateral field looking for unusual vegetation changes, soft spots, odors or surfacing. Avoid driving or parking vehicles on your lateral field. If you notice sogginess in the lateral areas consider taking proactive steps to increase drainage when appropriate. In some situations adding a curtain or perimeter drain tile 10' away from your field is an excellent long term solution. Divert surface watershed, eaves discharges and sump pump water from your septic system and the lateral area; these waters do not require treatment and may overwhelm your system and lead to failure.