

Handy hints to help you care for your septic tank system

- Household detergents and bathroom products should be biodegradable. Try to find products labeled 'septic tank safe' and use only as recommended.
- Thoroughly scrape all food scraps, oil and fat residue from plates, dishes, saucepans etc. before washing.
- Use toilet paper that readily breaks down and do not flush sanitary napkins, tampons, disposable nappies etc. into the septic tank – these items do not break down and will cause the septic tank to block.
- Avoid fitting food waste disposal units. Instead compost raw vegetable materials in a compost bin or worm farm.
- All vents and inspection openings into the drain and septic tank should be properly sealed to prevent access of mosquitoes.
- Your septic tank should be pumped out every five years. If you are connected to STEDS Council's contractor will advise you when this free service is due next. In the case of some multiple units and commercial situations more frequent pump outs may be required. If your septic tank is not connected to Council's STEDS you should organise regular pump outs through a suitably licensed contractor

Odour problems: Common causes and solutions

It is normal for septic tank systems to give off some odours. Whether these odours become a nuisance will depend on several factors. Most odours originate from the septic tank and discharge through the head vent. Factors affecting whether odours become a nuisance include:

Vents

- People may or may not notice odours from their septic tank depending on the location of vents on the house and whether they are in a regular 'traffic' area.
- Calm weather conditions can emphasise odour problems for a longer period of time.
- Verandahs, pergolas, high fences etc. in the vicinity of the head vent can trap any unpleasant odours, particularly on calm days.
- Sometimes odours may come from a neighbour's vent if dwellings are within close proximity.
- Odours may be escaping from a septic tank lid or inspection point situated at ground level rather than from a vent.

Other

- Heavy water usage (eg. When clothes washing) may agitate the septic tank contents causing a surge in odours.
- Constant sour odours may indicate a low pH level in the tank.

Note: Unpleasant odours are not a health risk and do not necessarily mean that the septic tank needs pumping out

Solving some of these nasty odour problems

In most cases steps can be taken to stop or reduce odour problems.

- The vertical height of the head vent can be extended by a metre or so to allow odours to discharge at a high level.
- If more than one vent exists on a house an 'air admittance valve' can be fitted. These devices allow air into the system but do not allow air to escape. They are available from plumbing suppliers.
- Vents of 75mm to 100mm diameter can be reduced to 50mm to reduce the amount of odours being discharged
- Sometimes a 'sour' odour may indicate a low pH in the tank. To fix this, 500g hydrated lime can be flushed into the septic tank 3-4 times a year via the toilet pan, which will raise the pH of the septic tank contents.
- Commercial products which balance the microbial activity in the tank and reduce odours are available.
- Ensure all inspection points and septic tank lids are adequately sealed to prevent odours from escaping.
- If odours are noticed inside the house it is most likely due to a loss of the water seal in the toilet or floor traps. Flushing the toilet or running water into a basin will replace the seal, ceasing the odours. Unfortunately there is no simple solution to prevent the loss of the water seal in toilets and floor traps.

What to do if your septic tank system is blocked

- The most common reason for a blockage is the collection of material at the inlet point of the tank. In older tanks there is a cleaning point at the inlet of the tank. More recently made tanks have an inspection point over the inlet point. Plunging either of these points will release the built up material and clear the blockage.
- If your house has old style earthenware drains there is a higher possibility of blockages due to intrusion of tree roots. Houses with PVC drains are less likely to suffer from this sort of problem. An older septic tank may also become blocked due to root intrusion.
- Experience has shown that a septic tank can comfortably survive five years between pump outs. If a blockage occurs in between pump outs it is likely to be a blockage at the inlet point of the tank. Plunging of the inlet point as described above will clear the blockage in most cases.

It is not always possible to clear a blockage yourself and so in many cases the assistance of a plumber will be necessary.

Reducing water use

- Fit water saving showerheads to showers and dual flushes to toilets.
- Replace top loading washing machines with front loading machines as this will significantly reduce water use.

Things you should and should not do

The following points will help to ensure correct operation of your septic tank system and help extend the life of the system.

- Ensure storm water, including rainwater tank overflows and surface run off, does not enter the septic tank system.
- Relief valves on mains pressure hot water services should be activated every 2-3 months to prevent valve failure and the constant dripping of water into the septic tank system.
- Disposal of cooking oils and fats down the drain may cause blockages in the system. Dispose of these by placing them in a sealed container and pitting them in the general rubbish bin.
- Unused medicines and pharmaceutical products should be correctly disposed of and not allowed to enter the septic tank system.
- Backwash water from swimming pools and spas must not be discharged into the septic tank. In STEDS areas the discharge is to be connected after the septic tank via a gully trap. Where STEDS is not available, the discharge is to be directed to a below ground agricultural drain or subsurface soakage trench. Contact Council for more details.
- Do not discharge commercial or industrial waste such as paints and petrol products into a septic tank system.