

TOWARDS BETTER ONSITE WASTEWATER MANAGEMENT IN VICTORIA - COMMUNITY EDUCATION SERIES

FACT SHEET 11: OPERATION & MAINTENANCE OF ONSITE WASTEWATER SYSTEMS – TIPS FOR HOME OWNERS & TENANTS

This fact sheet provides some easy tips to assist with the operation and maintenance of domestic wastewater systems. This fact sheet also provides a record that you can use to keep track of the work you have done on your system and any maintenance undertaken.

11.1 EASY TIPS:

The main causes of problems with onsite wastewater treatment systems include:

- The introduction of too much water into the wastewater system;
- Allowing incompatible chemicals and materials to enter the system that then interfere with the operation of your system; and
- Too many fats and oils getting into the system then clogging up your pipes and disposal system.

Here are some tips to help reduce the load on your onsite wastewater treatment system and the load on your wallet.

11.2 IN THE HOUSE:

- Repair leaking taps and toilets as soon as possible to reduce the water load on the system;
- Only use septic-safe cleaning chemicals in and around the home. Chemicals that contain large amounts of antibacterial compounds can kill the good bugs (eg. bacteria) that work hard inside the wastewater system to improve the water quality and break down the waste;
- Ensure personal care and hygiene products are not flushed down the toilet as they take a long time to break down and can clog components of the wastewater system.

11.3 IN THE LAUNDRY:

- Spread your washing out over the week. This will avoid flooding the system with large amounts of water at one time;
- Use low-phosphorous detergents. Phosphorous is a major pollutant of waterways and contributes to algal blooms and environmental degradation;
- Ensure your laundry detergents are low in sodium. Sodium can have very negative impacts on the soil and the vegetation in your wastewater disposal area, which are vital to the wastewater system;
- Use liquid detergents or highly biodegradable powder detergents to reduce the impact on your wastewater system and the surrounding environment;
- Avoid blockages in the system by installing a lint filter on the washing machine and keeping it clean;
- If you have a blocked drain, use boiling water or an electric eel to clear the line, rather than using caustic soda or another chemical that will affect the functioning of the system;
- Select a washing machine that rates high on the WELS system for water efficiency (www.waterrating.gov.au);
- Wash only full loads. Hand washing of small items saves water.

Refer to Lanfax Laboratories website at <http://www.lanfaxlabs.com.au> for more information about laundry products to assist in managing your wastewater

11.4 IN THE KITCHEN:

- Use a sink strainer. This will help to prevent food particles entering the wastewater system and slowing down its function;
- Do not pour oils and fats down the sink. They solidify and may block the pipes. Instead, put them into a container such as a milk carton and throw it out with the rubbish;
- Wipe grease out of pans and dishes before washing them; – Wash only full loads in the dishwasher;
- Install low-flow taps at the sink;
- Avoid installing and using a sink garbage disposal unit;
- Ensure your dish washing detergents are low in sodium to protect the environment receiving your wastewater;
- Avoid using chemical drain cleaners.

11.5 IN THE BATHROOM:

- Install a low-flow shower head to conserve water;
- A dual flush toilet can significantly reduce the amount of wastewater your system needs to manage;
- Minimise the use of harsh cleaners such as bleach and other disinfectants as they can interfere with the good bugs (eg. bacteria) that help to breakdown the waste. Instead, try baking soda or a very mild detergent solution;
- Do not flush anything down the toilet that could clog up the system, i.e. condoms, tampons, cat litter etc. These items will quickly fill up your tank, decreasing its efficiency and making it necessary to pump it out more often;
- Verify that the toilet is not leaking by placing a small amount of food dye in the cistern. If you see dye in the toilet bowl within 30 minutes, your cistern is leaking and you need to contact a licensed plumbing practitioner to have this fixed.

11.6 AROUND THE SEPTIC TANK OR AERATED WASTE WATER TREATMENT SYSTEM:

You need to know where your treatment system is located and that service agents or licensed plumbing practitioners can have easy access to it for repairs or servicing. It is very common that septic tanks have been buried and if this is case then you need to find it, dig it up and install “saddles” or “risers” to allow ongoing access.

- Avoid planting trees close to your septic tank. The roots could invade the tank and pipes as they grow;
- If the alarm on your pump well or package treatment plant is triggered, seek assistance from a licenced plumber or service agent immediately;
- Do not connect water outlets such as storm water drains to your septic tank;
- Add filters to the outlet of the tank. This can extend the life of your effluent disposal system;
- Check the baffle and T-junctions within the tank. If either are damaged, they will need replacement before more damage is done;
- Keep the tank clear of vegetation;
- If the lid of the septic system is broken, ensure it is repaired immediately to avoid storm water invasion. Also, ultra violet radiation from the sun can have detrimental effects on the functioning of the septic system;
- Ensure the septic system is de-sludged every 3-5 years depending on use, by a qualified licensed plumbing practitioner
- Ensure that quarterly servicing of the wastewater system is completed by an adequately qualified service agent (AWTS);
- Ensure the tank is sealed and that all air vents are covered with netting or gauze to prevent mosquito and insect access to the tank;
- When they are functioning correctly, wastewater systems do not smell. If you detect an odour emanating from your wastewater system, it may be as simple as a pH imbalance in the tank. Try flushing a cup of garden lime down the toilet every day until the odour stops. If the odour does not cease in a two week period, seek assistance from a licensed plumbing practitioner or service agent.

For further advice on managing specific onsite wastewater management systems please refer to Fact Sheet 1: Conventional Septic Tanks and Fact Sheet 2: Aerated Wastewater Treatment Systems.

11.7 AROUND THE EFFLUENT DISPOSAL AREA - TRENCHES OR IRRIGATION SYSTEMS:

- Divert storm water away from the effluent disposal area. If the field is flooded, the soil will not be able to absorb the wastewater coming from the tank;
- Only plant grass or shallow-rooted, salt and nutrient tolerant plants in the effluent disposal area. Roots from larger plants may clog and damage the effluent disposal system;

- Do not drive cars or allow stock over any part of the system. This can compact the soil and damage the effluent disposal system;
- Do not build any structures, including house extensions, pools or sheds, over your tank or effluent disposal area as this will prevent adequate access, evaporation and transpiration of wastewater, and will interfere with the foundations of the structure;
- If there is any sign of water pooling on the surface of the effluent disposal area, seek assistance from a licensed plumbing practitioner or service agent immediately.

For further advice on managing effluent disposal systems, please refer to Fact Sheet 6: Common Disposal Methods (Primary Treatment) for information on trenches and Fact Sheet 7: Common Disposal Methods (Secondary Treatment Systems).

11.8 MANAGING GREY WATER AND GREASE TRAPS:

Some systems will include a separate system for grey water collection. Grey water is the wastewater that comes from the kitchen, laundry and bathroom. Be aware that grey water may have a high number of bad bugs (eg. virus) and consequently needs to be disposed of appropriately. This means directed to a septic tank, trench or, alternatively, be treated to a high standard before being used for irrigation or reuse within the house. Also, some systems may include a grease trap attached to the kitchen that is designed to collect oils and fats. To keep all systems operating as well as possible:

- Clean the grease trap every six weeks. Carefully remove all solids, ensuring that preventative measures are taken, in particular wearing gloves. Ensure the solids are disposed of in an appropriate manner.
- Clean the holding/collection well and pumps frequently. You will need a licensed plumbing practitioner or service agent to complete this task.

For further advice on greywater treatment systems refer to Fact Sheet 5: Greywater Systems in Non-sewered Areas.

11.9 ON SITE DOMESTIC WASTEWATER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM MAINTENANCE RECORD

NEXT SERVICE	SCHEDULED ACTIVITY	COMPANY / PRACTITIONER	ACTIVITIES COMPLETED	COMMENTS

11.10 WHO TO CONTACT:

If you are a tenant of a rental property reliant on an onsite domestic wastewater management system, be sure to contact your property manager should you have any concerns regarding the system. The property manager will be able to advise you of your responsibilities in onsite wastewater management. Should you wish to receive further information, contact your local government Environmental Health Officer

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