

# Your Septic System:

*Protecting Your Investment and the Environment*



Photo courtesy of Ontario Tourism Marketing Partnership Corporation

## Maintaining Your Septic System

Most rural homes and cottages use a septic system — a sewage system that usually consists of a tank and a leaching bed or tile bed. You own the septic system and are responsible for its safe operation, maintenance and repair.

A septic system is like any other equipment in your house. If you operate and maintain the system responsibly, it will work well and should last a long time. A typical life span is approximately 15 to 25 years. A properly functioning septic system provides a safe, reliable way of treating your household wastewater.

If you don't maintain your septic system, you could be endangering your family's health, the integrity of the natural environment and nearby water sources.

## Regular Maintenance

Regular inspections can find existing or potential problems before they become severe and more costly to fix. Regular maintenance can also add years to the life of your system, benefitting you and protecting your municipality's drinking water sources. Regular maintenance will vary based on the type, age, and use of the system. Regular maintenance for a conventional septic system would mean cleaning out the effluent filter (if one is installed) and pumping out the septic tank once every three to five years. Systems

that use treatment units other than septic tanks need to have a maintenance contract with a person who is authorized by the manufacturer to maintain the unit. Advanced treatment units need annual monitoring.

## Operating Your Septic System Safely

Here are some things you can do to responsibly operate and maintain your septic system:

- Know the location of your tank and bed, and protect it from damage. Don't drive over it or construct anything (e.g., pools, driveways and sheds) on or near any part of it.
- Have the tank pumped out every three to five years.
- Don't put food, compost or grease down your drains.
- Conserve water and try to spread water use over the course of the week, especially laundry.
- Avoid excessive use of anti-bacterial soaps, bleaches and harsh cleaning products.
- Don't put paints, solvents, pesticides and other toxic chemicals in your system; use recycling or hazardous waste collection programs for these substances.
- Keep trees and shrubs away from the leaching bed.

Operating your system safely reduces the chances of wastewater escaping and contaminating your well and those nearby, such as your neighbour's.

The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care recommends you sample the water and test for bacteria to ensure your well water is safe. Testing water samples is a free service offered through your local public health unit.

## Time of Sale Inspections

Buyers, real estate agents and financial institutions often request that septic systems be inspected as a condition of sale. Like a home inspection, a septic inspection can uncover problems and protect the buyer against unexpected costs.

## Septic System Inspections

Septic systems not working properly can emit wastes and bacteria that contaminate groundwater or nearby

surface water. You can prevent this by having your system inspected regularly. In some areas of the province, septic system inspections are mandatory.

Septic systems must be inspected if they are:

- Within 100 metres of the Lake Simcoe shoreline or within 100 metres of another body of water within the Lake Simcoe watershed.
- Near a municipal well or water intake area. You can find out where these are by contacting your municipality or checking the local source protection plan available through your local conservation authority.

Municipalities can also require inspections and some have already started inspection programs. Local enforcement agencies, such as the building department, conservation authority or health unit conduct inspections.

Contact your municipality to find out your local requirement for septic inspections.



## Signs That Your System Might be Failing

Your septic system may be in trouble if you experience any of the following:

- Spongy spots on or near the leaching bed
- Sewage on the ground or near the bed
- Odour in your basement or outside
- Poor water quality at your well or intake
- Slow moving or backed-up drains in your home

If your septic system is not working properly you can hire a septic installer to repair it. If the repair needs a building permit then an inspector from a municipal building department, conservation authority or health unit will review the plans, issue a permit and inspect it. An inspector should identify any problems and the work necessary to repair your system. You may need to pay a fee.

## New or Replacement Septic Systems

A building permit from the local enforcement agency is needed if you replace or install a new septic system. The enforcement agency may be a municipal building department, conservation authority or health unit, depending where you live. Your municipality can direct you to the right agency. When completed, the work must be approved and inspected by the local

enforcement agency to ensure it meets the requirements of the Building Code. The enforcement agency that approves new septic systems is also responsible for maintenance inspections, where required.

Your municipality can also tell you who enforces septic system requirements in your area.

## Information Sources on Septic Systems

- Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change  
[ontario.ca/ministry-environment](http://ontario.ca/ministry-environment)
- Ministry of Municipal Affairs & Housing  
[ontario.ca/buildingcode](http://ontario.ca/buildingcode)
- Ontario Rural Wastewater Centre  
[orwc.uoguelph.ca](http://orwc.uoguelph.ca)
- Ontario Onsite Wastewater Association  
[oowa.org](http://oowa.org)
- Ontario Association of Sewage Industry Services  
[oasisontario.on.ca](http://oasisontario.on.ca)
- Your local Conservation Authority, Health Unit or Building Department



© Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2014  
PIBS 6369e03  
ISBN 978-1-4606-4437-9