

Preventing and Solving Sewage Treatment Problems During a Flood

Sewage Problems During a Flood

Flood conditions can cause a number of potential problems for users of private sewage treatment (septic) systems. This web page describes steps you can take to prevent - or resolve - flood related sewage problems.

How can I prevent sewage back-up?

Flood water can increase pressure on your sewage system, leading to possible sewage back-ups. The following precautions will help prevent a sewage back-up in your home.

Sinks, bathtubs, & showers

- Flush toilets only when necessary.
- Take sponge baths instead of tub baths and showers.
- Use towelettes to clean your hands - unless they are very dirty, or you are preparing food.

In the kitchen

- Use disposable plates, cups, and silverware whenever possible.
- Do not use your dishwasher - wash all dishes by hand.
- Prepare food that won't get as many dishes dirty - such as canned or frozen fruits or vegetables.
- Do not run water in the sink to get it cool - use ice or cool it in the refrigerator, instead.

In the laundry

- Take your laundry to the Laundromat - don't do it at home.

And, in general

- Avoid discharging water into floor drains.
- If you use a sump pump, do not pump the effluent into a septic tank.
- Do not use your water softener.
- Check for leaky faucets and water pipes.

REMEMBER

- Whenever the water table is high - or your sewage system is threatened by flood water - you run the risk that sewage will back up into your home.
- Relieving pressure on the system - by using it less is the only way you can prevent a back-up.

What if a back-up does happen?

If you do end up with a sewage back-up problem, the following steps will help keep the damage to a minimum.

- Begin by removing all floor drain covers.
- Use mechanical metal grip plugs to seal the drains - and prevent sewage from entering the home.
- Repeat the process for toilets, bathtub drains, and shower drains.
- Metal grip plugs are available at plumbing supply stores.

What if my system become flooded?

Stop using your sewage system:

- If your septic tank or drain field becomes flooded.
- If you can see any raw sewage or "grey water" on the surface of the ground, as a result of waste water leaking from your system.
- If wastewater begins to enter your home through drains or plumbing fixtures.

After the flood

If your drain field has been flooded, you may or may not be able to use it again. You may need to relocate your drain field to a site with more suitable soil conditions. If you need help in determining whether to relocate your drain field, contact your local planning or zoning office.

- Pump the system as soon as possible after the flood recedes. Be sure to pump both the septic tank and the pump/lift station (if you have one). This will remove silt and debris that have washed into the system that could cause damage to the drain field. However, it is not advisable to leave the septic tank empty after pumping if the soil around the area of the tank(s) is saturated; this can cause the tank to "float" toward the ground's surface if the soil's water pressure remains high. If you have this concern, consult a professional tank pumper.
- Locate and protect the drain field from compaction by keeping all traffic off the area including foot traffic, animals, and heavy equipment. Compaction reduces the capacity of your drain field to treat wastewater and could lead to the early failure of your entire system.
- Check electrical connections for damage or wear before turning electricity back on.
- Check that the manhole cover is secure and that inspection ports have not been blocked or damaged. Check for animal damage or intrusion in the drain field area.
- Check the vegetation over your septic tank and drain field. Repair erosion damage; sod or reseed as necessary to provide a good plant cover.
- Inside your home, be sure to disinfect thoroughly if sewage backed up into the house or garage. Disease-causing organisms (pathogens) in wastewater can cause serious illness, such as dysentery, hepatitis, and other waterborne illnesses.
- If homeowners have additional concerns they should discuss them with a local septic system permitting authority or other septic system professional.

For more information go to the University of Minnesota, Extension Service, [Protect your septic system from flood damage](#).