

WHY IS MY SEPTIC SYSTEM FAILING?

North Georgia Health District

There can be multiple causes of septic system failure but here are the most common causes in order of occurrence:

1. USING TOO MUCH WATER – Unlike a city sewer, a septic system has a certain capacity for treating and disposing of your household wastewater on your property. Once that capacity is reached, sewage backs up in your home or breaks out in your yard above the system's absorption field (drainfield.) When your septic system was installed its size was based on the number of bedrooms in the home, the percolation rate of soils on your property and average water use. If your water use is above average, this could be the cause of failure. Cutting down on water use can solve this problem in many cases. Space out clothes washing each week and tell your teens that 30-minute showers are not necessary. Hot tubs may be a great way to relax, but when it comes to emptying them, your septic system should be avoided. Any way you can cut down on water use will help.

2. PLUMBING LEAKS – Running toilets cause many septic system failures and can be fixed for less than \$15 by replacing the mechanism in the toilet tank that fills and holds water. Sometimes you cannot hear a leaking toilet but you can see it by placing a few drops of food coloring in the toilet tank. Fix any leaking faucets and showers in your home. Although rare, hot water heaters can leak through the pressure relief valve. Condensation drains from your AC unit should discharge to the outside ground and not into the sewer plumbing.

3. YOUR SEPTIC SYSTEM IS PAST ITS EXPECTED LIFE – With proper maintenance septic systems may last 20 or 30 years, but eventually most absorption fields (drainfields) become clogged with sludge and must be replaced. To extend the life of your septic system, have the sludge pumped out of your septic tank every 3 to 5 years to keep sludge out of your drainfield. No septic system additive has ever been proved to extend the life of septic systems. Regular pumping is all that is required, nothing else. I've heard people brag that they have never had to pump out their septic tank. This is like bragging that you never have to change the oil in your car.

4. GREASE, GARBAGE DISPOSALS, TOXIC CHEMICALS – If grease gets past your septic tank and into your absorption field, it coats soil particles and stops percolation. Never dispose of grease down the drain or garbage disposal! Unless your home septic system was designed for it, do not install a garbage disposal in your kitchen sink. A garbage disposal requires a 1500 gallon septic tank or larger. If you have a garbage disposal, use it sparingly. Put food wastes into the trash. Never dispose of paint or chemicals down the sink. They can kill bacteria in your septic tank and drainfield, plus pollute groundwater including wells.

5. SEASONAL GROUNDWATER – Groundwater is usually highest in the months of February, March and April. Depending on the amount of rain, soils may become saturated and unable to absorb the sewage from your drainfield. This condition can be brief and you can help by cutting down on household water use. For example, take your clothes to a Laundromat for a few weeks. If the problem persists consult your environmental health office and a certified septic contractor. In such times of exceptionally rainy weather over weeks, soils become saturated and do not drain properly.

5. POOLING OF WATER OVER YOUR ABSORPTION FIELD – If soils settle or other things cause water to pool above your absorption field (drainfield), this can cause failure. For example, gutters that discharge roof water over the absorption field area saturate the soils and cause failure. Changing the way rain water runs over your yard and the drainfield can do the same.

6. IMPROPER DESIGN OR INSTALLATION - The proper design and installation of a septic system is essential for it to function correctly. Always use septic contractors who are certified by the state. Never pave or build over your septic system. A copy of your system's inspection is usually available at your local environmental health office. Your health department official is available to consult with you on any question concerning your septic system.

7. OTHER LESS COMMON PROBLEMS - The sewage pipe between the house and the tank can be blocked or broken. Either the inlet or outlet tee (inside the tank) can be blocked or broken. The sewer pipe between the tank and drainfield can be blocked or broken. Heavy items such as vehicles, horses, and permanent structures can crush pipes and compact the soil, causing damage to the drainfield. Do not build structures over a septic system. If the system has a pump, there may have been an electrical or mechanical failure. The drainfield or sewer pipes are (partially or completely) clogged with tree roots. Flushing foreign objects down the drain ("Look Daddy! I flushed my toy!"). Water Softeners discharge salts which can, over time, damage your system. Excessive use of household chemicals can kill bacteria in your tank and drainfield. Normal use of household bleach should not pose a problem.

