# Maintain Your On-Site Septic System

Preventive maintenance is always wise when dealing with your home and major mechanicals. But if your home or cottage has an on-site septic system, preventive maintenance will not only save you money, it can prevent harmful pollutants from entering surface waters or groundwater. Each county in Wisconsin has the option of requiring its own maintenance program. Check with your county sanitarian to see what requirements exist.

The first step in routine care of your septic system is finding out where it is located. You may find records of its location at the county sanitarian's office if your home was built within the last 10 to 15 years. Or, the previous owner may have kept construction/installation records.

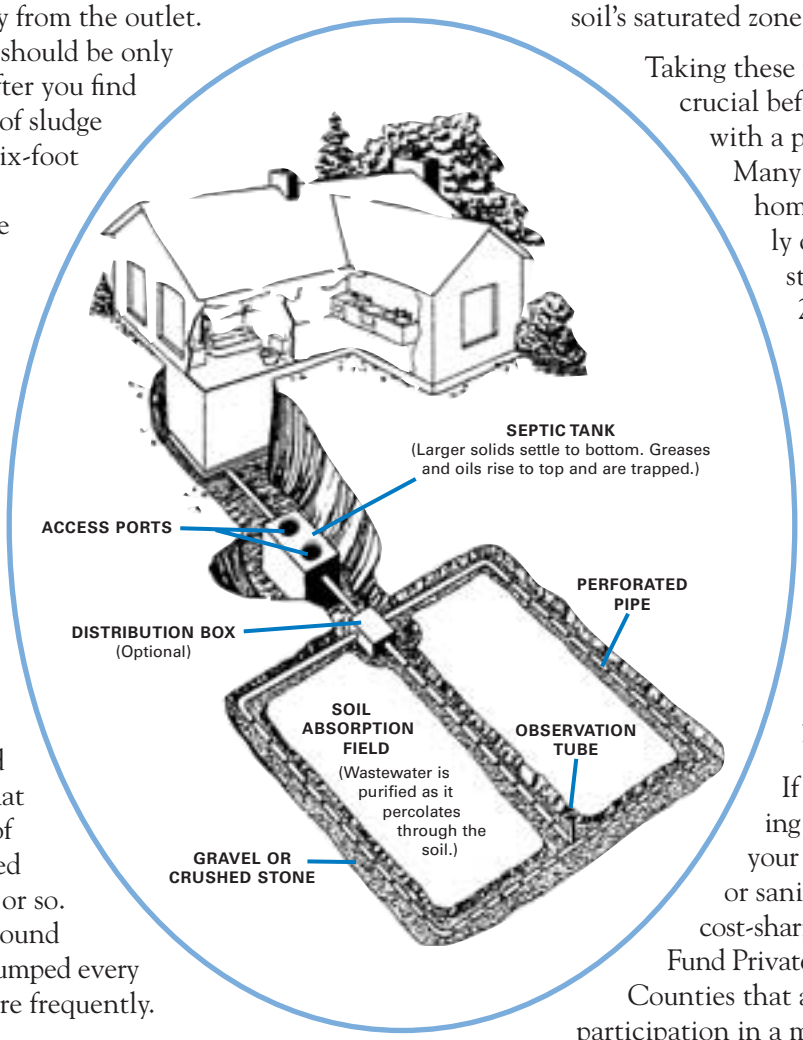
Another way is to trace where the plumbing leaves the house. Use a stiff wire or a thin metal rod to probe an area roughly 6-20 feet away from the outlet. The top of the septic tank should be only a few feet underground. After you find the tank, check the depth of sludge in the tank by lowering a six-foot or longer stick wrapped in white toweling through the access port until it hits the bottom of the tank. If the tank is more than one-third full of sludge and scum, it should be pumped. This capacity will be reached about once every year to three years.

How often a septic tank should be pumped depends in part on the family's size, tank size, and the use of the property. A two-bedroom cabin used seasonally on a property that has a septic tank capacity of 1,000 gallons may only need pumping every three years or so. Larger homes with a year-round residency may need to be pumped every year or two, sometimes more frequently.

Hire only septic tank pumpers licensed by the Department of Natural Resources. Ask county staff for a list of qualified sewage haulers in your area. After each pumping, the inlet and outlet structures and key joints should be inspected for damage. Leaving solids in the septic tank after pumping to aid in restarting the system is not necessary. In addition, special chemicals or additives are not needed to start activity in a septic tank.

You'll want to check the system's soil absorption field for any signs of surface seepage as well. If the grass is greener in some sections of the field, this could indicate leaking effluent. If an observation tube can be located, check for the depth of effluent.

If you suspect problems, you may want to hire a licensed plumber or soil tester to evaluate the system and the soil conditions. State law defines failing conditions for a private sewage disposal system as untreated wastewater backing up into the building, seeping to the soil surface, entering surface or groundwater, or moving into the soil's saturated zone.




Taking these precautionary steps are crucial before you purchase property with a private sewage system. Many sewage systems in older homes are not working properly or do not meet today's standards. In fact, nearly 20 percent of all private sewage disposal systems in Wisconsin are probably failing, according to the Department of Commerce (formerly Dept. of Industry, Labor and Human Relations). Know what you may be facing in terms of repairs or replacements before you buy a home with a private sewage system.

If you are faced with replacing your septic system, contact your county code administrator or sanitarian to find out about cost-sharing through the Wisconsin Fund Private Sewage Disposal Program. Counties that are participating require participation in a maintenance program.

For more information about septic systems and water quality, contact the Wisconsin Department of Commerce or your county sanitarian.