

News Release

A HEALTHY SEPTIC SYSTEM IS A KEY TO HEALTHY DRINKING WATER

RIDEAU VALLEY, May 20, 2008 —If you live in a rural area or if you have a cottage, you probably depend on your very own private sewage treatment plant called a septic system. A properly maintained septic system works very well to treat wastewater. Wastewater includes all of the water that you use in your house for everything from washing the dishes to flushing the toilet.

Not everyone knows whether they have a septic system, where it is located on their property or how it works. Buried under the ground, it tends to be out of sight and out of mind. Many people don't realize that septic systems require regular maintenance. Without regular maintenance, septic systems can stop working. Not only are they very expensive to replace, but an improperly functioning septic system can pollute your own drinking water or lake.

First of all, do you have a septic system? If your drinking water comes from a well or lake and your property is in a rural area, chances are you do. How well it is working depends upon how old the system is, how well it was maintained and how you use it.

So how does a septic system work? Although there are a number of different types of systems, most consist of two parts, a septic tank and a tile bed. If you don't know where they are on your property, it may take a bit of detective work to find out.

Water from your washing machine, sink, shower or toilet goes through a pipe into the septic tank. In the tank, the solids settle to the bottom and the liquid floats to the top. This is where the treatment of your wastewater starts. The liquid part then flows into the tile bed. This is a series of perforated pipes. From here it filters into the ground and is further treated, mainly by bacteria and other organisms in the soil.

This type of septic system uses gravity to flow the wastewater through the system and bacteria to remove contaminants from the system. It is a simple but effective way to treat your sewage.

What's the catch? The system needs to be maintained and used properly.

Your septic tank needs to be pumped regularly to remove the solids on the bottom of the tank. Eventually the tank fills up. How often it should be pumped depends on how much use it gets and the size of the tank. If there are a lot of people in the house, that means more sewage and more regular pump-outs of the septic tank. The system should be checked every two years and pumped out at least every five years, more often if it receives a lot of use.

There are other dos and don'ts for using a septic system. Don't use too much water at one time. Activities that require a lot of water, like clothes washing, should be spread out throughout the week. Putting too much water through the system over a short period of time can cause solids from the tank to flush into the leaching bed and clog the pipes. You have to allow enough time for the solids to settle.

When adding bathrooms or laundry facilities to your house or cottage, you may also need to upgrade your septic system. This is especially important if you are converting a cottage to a permanent home.

Very strong cleaning chemicals should be avoided. Use bleach, toilet bowl cleaners and drain cleaners sparingly. These potent chemicals can kill off the beneficial bacteria in your septic system that break down the contaminants in your wastewater.

Don't pour paints, thinners, motor oils, and solvents down the drain. You should not do this even if you're not on a septic system! Please use your municipal hazardous household waste procedure for these chemicals.

Cooking oils and fats down the drain can also clog up the system. Don't put these down the drain.

Don't drive cars or heavy machinery over your septic system, especially the leaching bed. This can damage the series of perforated pipes.

Don't plant trees or shrubs on or near the tile bed. Their roots can invade the perforated pipes, causing the system to stop working. Don't plant trees with spreading root structures like willows or poplars anywhere near your tile bed. These trees have amazing roots that have been known to crack foundations, so save these trees for the back 40.

If you are not sure when the last time your septic tank was pumped, it's time to do it. Look in the yellow pages of the telephone book under "Septic Tanks" to find a local, licensed company to pump out your septic tank. This will keep your septic system working, and your drinking water and your local lakes and rivers clean.

For more information about septic systems, call your local Health Unit or source protection group.

Cataraqui Source Protection Area — www.cataraquiregion.on.ca

Mississippi-Rideau Source Protection Region — www.mrsourcewater.ca

Quinte Source Protection Region — www.quintesourcewater.ca

Raisin-South Nation Source Protection Region — www.yourdrinkingwater.ca

