

What to do with your septic system after a flood

Should I pump my septic tank if the drainfield is flooded or saturated?

No! At best, pumping the tank is only a temporary solution. Under worst conditions, pumping the tank empty could cause it to try to float or pop out of the ground and damage inlet and outlet pipes. The best solution is to not use water or to drastically reduce water use.

What should I do with my septic system after the flood?

Once floodwaters have receded, there are a few things you should consider:

- Do not drink well water until the well has been tested for contamination. Contact your county health department for well-testing procedures.
- Don't use the septic system if the soil is still saturated or flooded. Consider turning off power at the circuit box if the septic system has a pump. The wastewater will not be treated and will become a source of pollution.
- Any floodwater in the house should not be dumped into a sink or toilet because it will go into the overloaded septic system.
- If sewage has backed up into the basement, clean the area and disinfect thoroughly.
- Keep children and pets away from areas where sewage was present on the ground surface. Sewage may contain organisms that can make you sick.
- Do not open the septic tank for pumping while the soil is saturated. Mud and silt may enter the tank and be discharged to the drainfield. Pumping out a tank in saturated soils may cause it to pop out of the ground.
- Flooding of the septic tank may have lifted the floating crust of fats and grease in the tank. Scum may have floated and/or partially plugged the outlet tee. If the septic system backs up into the house, your septic maintainer (your "pumper") should check the tank for outlet blockage.
- Don't wait too long to have your septic system inspected and serviced if you suspect damage. Signs of damage include settling or inability to accept wastewater. Septic tanks and pump tanks can fill with silt and debris, so they may need to be properly cleaned by a Minnesota Pollution Control Agency- (MPCA-) licensed individual sewage treatment system (ISTS) maintainer after the water recedes.
- Conserve water while the septic system dries out. Once the area around the septic system has dried out, the septic tank (and pump tank) should be evaluated to determine whether they need to be cleaned out.
- Take care not to compact soil over the drainfield or mound by driving or operating equipment in the area. Saturated soil is susceptible to compaction, which reduces the ability of septic systems to function properly.
- Examine electrical connections for damage before restoring electricity to use a pump.
- Be sure the septic tank's manhole covers are secure and inspection pipes have not been blocked or damaged.
- Check the vegetation over your septic system. Repair erosion damage and sod or reseed to provide good grass cover. Direct any surface water away from your septic system, too.

What if I use my septic system to dispose of wastewater from my home-based or small business?

Small businesses may use their septic systems to dispose of wastewater containing chemicals as well as raw sewage. If your septic system receives chemicals and it backs up into a basement or drainfield, take extra precautions to prevent skin, eye and inhalation contact. The proper cleanup depends on which chemicals are in the wastewater. Contact your county or the MPCA for more information.

Where can I find information about maintaining my septic system?

Contact your county for additional advice and assistance. A document on the University of Minnesota website, at <http://septic.umn.edu/factsheets/protectfromflood.html>, has related information for septic system owners. Or, you can call the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency at 800-657-3864 or 651-296-6300 for additional information.