

**serious\*\***  
a quick guide to...

# septic tanks



Septic tanks separate solid and liquid waste by allowing the solids to settle. The liquids should then soak away through a land drain. For this reason, septic tanks are only suitable if the soil at your property allows liquid to drain away easily.

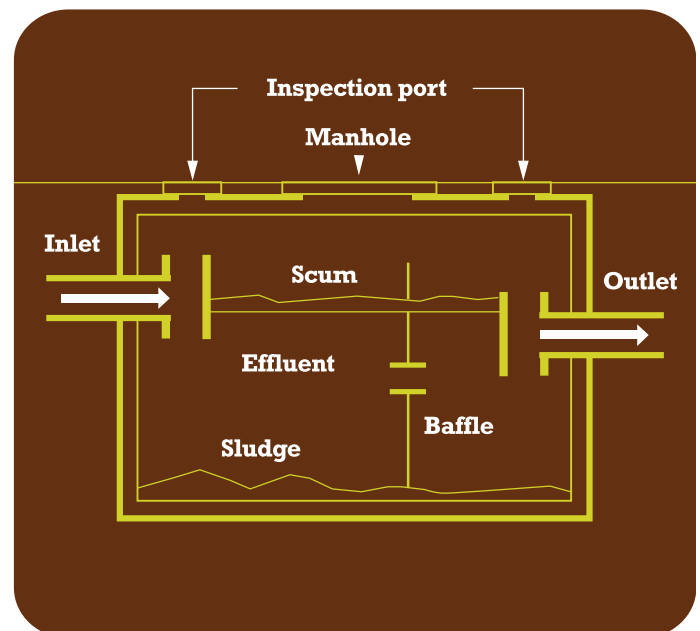
It's worth noting that many old systems discharge unsightly, foul-smelling liquid into watercourses. This shouldn't be happening and cases like this should be reported to the Environment Agency.

If you're discharging to a watercourse, or you're dealing with large volumes of waste (if you're running a pub or hotel for example), you may need permission from the Environment Agency before installing the tank.

## how it works

Waste water leaves your house via the plumbing system and enters the septic tank. Here, gravity separates solids and liquids. The heavy solids (known as sludge) build up at the bottom of the tank, while lighter greases and oils, or scum, float to the top of the liquid layer. Naturally present micro-organisms begin to break down the contaminants in the liquid, partially treating the waste. This process generates natural gases, which are released through plumbing vents.

The liquid in the tank, called effluent, flows into a soakaway system. Ideally, this will be a series of pipes, set underground in a bed of crushed rock, that allow the effluent to seep slowly into the ground. If you don't have enough land for this, the soakaway could be as simple as a large hole filled with crushed rock. The rock acts as a filter, while natural bacteria helps break down the waste even further.



**let's talk about\*\*it**

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## **maintaining the system**

Look after your septic tank and it will look after you. At least once a year, you'll need to arrange a visit from one of our tankers. This keeps your tank working efficiently and helps prevent damage to the soakaway. We'll use a vacuum tanker to remove the sludge and scum, or if it's just a small domestic tank we'll empty it completely.

## **a word of warning**

Every septic tank system is designed to handle a certain volume of waste. If more people are using the tank, you might need to have it emptied more often, or increase the size of the tank or soakaway to cope with the extra volume.

## **you and your septic tank**



### **a few do's...**

- **Check cleaning products' labels and go for the ones that say they're okay to use with septic tanks.**
- **Reduce the amount of water you use to help your system perform better for longer. Environmentally and septic tank-friendly devices include low water-use toilets; reduced-flow showerheads and taps; and washing machines and dishwashers with different cycles and settings.**
- **Use your common sense. Take shorter showers, turn off the water when brushing your teeth, and don't turn the washing machine or dishwasher on until it's fully loaded.**
- **Think about installing a separate septic tank / soakaway system for the washing machine, especially if yours gets a lot of use.**
- **Keep plumbing in good repair to avoid leaks and drips, and maintain the minimum water pressure needed in the house to keep appliances running properly.**

## **when it all goes wrong**

If you don't have your tank de-sludged regularly, sludge builds up. This means there's less space for solids to settle, so there's a danger they could be carried into the soakaway. If the level of sludge reaches the outlet it can damage the tank – this is a particular problem with newer glass-reinforced plastic or fibreglass tanks. Both scenarios lead to 'blinding' or blocking of the soakaway, and the whole system becomes ineffective. This kind of damage can be irreversible.

### **you'll know you've got a problem when...**

- **Sinks and toilets take ages to drain away**
- **Sewage backs up in the house**
- **Manholes or the tank itself overflows, or pools appear around the tank or soakaway area**

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### and a few don'ts...

- **Don't overload the system – it's designed to cope with a certain number of users and no more. Typically, tanks are sized according to the number of bedrooms. For guidance, see the British Water publication 'Flows & Loads 3: Sizing Criteria, Treatment Capacity for Small Wastewater Treatment Systems'.**
- **Don't dispose of anything more than the usual domestic waste. Standard systems are designed to handle flow from showers, washing machines, toilets and sinks. Reducing the amount of waste you produce will help the soakaway last longer, save money in the long run and reduce the risk of nasty accidents.**
- **Don't put pesticides or other hazardous household chemicals down your sink. The bacteria in sewage systems can't cope with pesticides, paint products, stain removers, petroleum products or cleaners. These chemicals will just pass through the system and may cause pollution.**
- **Give garbage disposal units the thumbs down, and put grease, fats, coffee granules and food leftovers in the bin. Putting solids like these down the drain will mean the sludge in the tank builds up quicker and it will need to be emptied more often. A far better option is to compost this waste and use it in your garden.**
- **Think before your flush – don't put anything down the loo that won't deteriorate easily. That's no to kitchen towel, baby and cleansing wipes, sanitary towels and tampons and disposable nappies. Bin them instead.**
- **Don't use detergents containing phosphorus – strong household cleaning chemicals can damage the bacteria that help decompose waste. Ordinary amounts of non-chlorinated bleaches, caustics, soaps, detergents and drain cleaners are fine, so carry on cleaning.**
- **Don't divert rainwater from gutters or storm drains into your septic tank system.**

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