



COVID-19 and the Impacts on Septic Systems

Do you know what happens to your wastewater after you take a shower, wash dishes, or flush the toilet? Where exactly does it go? How does it affect the environment? And why should you care? If you are like most people, you never give much thought to what happens to the wastewater from your home and community. But whether you think about it much or not, wastewater continues to affect your life even after it disappears down the drain.

The water we use never really goes away. In fact, all of the wastewater we generate eventually returns to the environment – after it has been properly treated at a public wastewater treatment plant in a community or through the soil in a Private Onsite Wastewater Treatment System (POWTS or septic system). A properly installed and managed septic system uses soil to treat viruses and other disease-causing organisms so that by the time the treated wastewater enters the water table, there is no harm to drinking water supplies.

While we are working through this Safer-At-Home time during the COVID-19 crisis, we are putting added pressure on septic systems that otherwise got some down time while parents were at work and the kids were at school. We might be using more disinfectants and bleach or washing clothes and showering more often. Along with that, while we are at home we are making more meals and washing more dishes. All of this has an impact on the septic system.

With all of the other unknowns that we are surrounded by during this COVID-19 crisis, we surely don't want to have an issue with our septic system! Here are a few tips on why and how to keep your septic system in good working condition through this COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

- 1) **Be sure the septic system is properly treating the wastewater.** If the septic system has a pipe or hose that is discharging wastewater to the ground surface, viruses (like COVID-19) are not being treated and can be present in the sewage that is surfacing on the ground. Viruses and other disease-causing organisms can be spread to other humans in the community by flies, dogs, birds, mice or other vectors that might come into contact with contaminated sewage. In addition, if there isn't proper separation from your septic system to high groundwater or bedrock (usually older systems or steel tanks >20 years old), bacteria, nutrients and disease-causing organisms will not be properly treated in the soil and can easily move into the drinking water or surrounding surface waters.
- 2) **Be sure your septic system is being well managed.** Septic systems use naturally occurring bacteria to help decompose and treat the wastewater we put into them. They cannot function properly when they receive large amounts of bleach, disinfectants or other chemical products. Keep this in mind when you dump cleaning products down the drain or flush them down your toilet and limit their use. Along with that, because of a toilet paper shortage, some people are using other products for wipes. Baby wipes, tissues, paper towels and flushable wipes do not break down in the septic tank and can lead to backups into the house. These should not be flushed at all - even on a community system. Other helpful system management techniques include:

- Use liquid laundry and dishwashing detergent – powder detergents can cause clogging in the drainfield
- No need to use anti-bacterial soap – regular soap does the same job and does not stress the good bacteria needed in the septic tank
- Reduce water usage by limiting showers, repairing leaks, and reducing number of wash loads
- Avoid stressing your system by spreading laundry wash loads throughout the week instead of one day
- Don't use a garbage disposal – this increases the organic load on the septic system
- Have the septic system pumped and/or inspected every three years by a professional. This professional inspection may help reveal issues that might be occurring with your system before it becomes imminent.

3) **Be sure any above grade manholes are LOCKED at all times.** With schools closed and kids playing in the yard more - be sure that the manhole lid(s) on a septic or holding tank cannot be easily lifted. Every year we hear of children – and even adults – falling into septic tanks and causing death. These accidents are easily preventable.

If you have questions or concerns about your septic system, contact the local governmental unit responsible for the POWTS program in your county. In Wisconsin, this is generally the county zoning, planning or environmental health office.

This factsheet brought to you by:

Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services - POWTS Program

POWTS Contacts can be found here: <https://dsps.wi.gov/Documents/Programs/Maps/Wastewater.pdf>

March 31, 2020