

Septic Systems– What to do after a flood

Don't pump a septic tank during flooded or saturated drainfield conditions At best, pumping the tank is only a temporary solution. Under worst conditions, pumping it out could cause the tank to try to float out of the ground and may damage the inlet and outlet pipes. The best solution is to plug all drains in the basement and drastically reduce water use in the house.

Once flood waters have receded, there are several things homeowners need to remember

- Do not drink well water until it is tested. Contact your local health department for testing.
- Do not use the septic system until water in the drainfield is lower than the drainfield piping.
- Have your septic system professionally inspected and serviced if it was covered in flood water or if you suspect damage. Signs of damage include settling, slow drains, or an inability to accept water. Most septic tanks are not damaged by flooding since they are below ground and completely covered. However, septic tanks and pump chambers can fill with silt and debris and must be professionally cleaned. If the drainfield is clogged with silt, a new system may have to be installed.
- Reduce water usage until the septic system is inspected and repaired if needed.
- Only professional service providers should clean or repair septic systems. Contact your local health department for a list of septic system contractors who work in your area.
- If recommended by a professional service provider, pump the septic system as soon as possible after the flood. Be sure to pump both the septic tank and pump tank. This will remove silt and debris that may have washed into the system. Do not pump the tank(s) during flooded or saturated drainfield conditions. At best, pumping the tank under flood conditions is only a temporary solution. Under worst conditions, pumping it out could cause the tank to try to float out of the ground and may damage the inlet and outlet pipes.
- Do not compact the soil over the drainfield by driving or operating equipment in the area. Saturated soil is especially susceptible to compaction, which can reduce the drainfield's ability to treat wastewater and lead to system failure.
- Examine all electrical connections for damage before restoring electricity.
- Be sure the septic tank's manhole cover is secure and that inspection ports have not been blocked or damaged.
- Check the vegetation over your septic tank and soil absorption field. Repair erosion damage and sod or re-seed areas as necessary to provide turf grass cover.
- If sewage has backed up into the basement, clean the area and disinfect the floor. Use a chlorine solution of a half cup of chlorine bleach to each gallon of water to disinfect the area thoroughly. Never mix bleach with any other cleaner.

Where can I find information on my septic system? Please contact your local health department for additional advice and assistance. For more information on onsite or decentralized wastewater systems, you can [visit EPA's Septic Systems Web site](#).

Additional resources:

[Flood Cleanup :: Washington State Department of Health](#)

[Toilet Use During Emergencies :: Washington State Department of Health](#)

[Septic Systems - What to Do after the Flood | US EPA](#)

[Flooding_Guidance_\(Septic\)_4-2-2019.pdf \(neha.org\)](#)

[When flooding is in the forecast. Climate change makes floods more... | by Washington State Department of Health | Public Health Connection | Nov. 2021 | Medium](#)

Note: This document was adapted from a Washington State Department of Health email. You can subscribe to them at <https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/WADOH/subscriber/new?preferences=true#tab1>