

Septic Tank Guidance - onsite wastewater management system responsibilities for property owners and users

What are the responsibilities for land or property owners and users of onsite wastewater management systems?

General Environmental Duty

- From 1 July 2021, the Environmental Protection Act created a general environmental duty (GED) that requires anyone conducting an activity that poses risks to human health and the environment from pollution and waste, to minimise those risks. This means if you own or use a septic tank, you must minimise the risks of the system on impacting human health and the environment.
- The GED applies to how the system is constructed, installed, altered, operated, and maintained. It also applies to how faults and system failures are dealt with and how waste is managed.
- You can find more information on general environmental duty on the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) website: <https://www.epa.vic.gov.au/about-epa/news-media-and-updates/whats-the-harm-ged-campaign>.

Maintenance

You have the responsibility to:

- Ensure the wastewater system is operated so it does not to pose a risk to human health or environment.
 - For example, ensuring the system is not overloaded to an extent that causes a blockage, runoff, spillage or leak.
- Make sure the contents of the septic tank system do not overflow and waste is appropriately managed.
- Check for signs the system may be failing or isn't in good working order.
- Notify Council after you become aware that the system poses a risk to human health or the environment, or is not in good working order. You will need to inform Council what you have done, or are doing, to fix the problem. The following could be signs that there the system poses a risk:

Wastewater management system	Effluent disposal area
There is an odour coming from or near the system	The absorption field of the system becomes sodden with wastewater pooling on the surface of the surrounding land
The drain or toilet of the system is running slowly	There is wastewater runoff from the disposal area

The grease trap of the system is full or blocked	Inspection pits consistently exhibiting high water levels
Lush green growth down-slope of the treatment plant	Lush green growth, or presence of dead and dying vegetation around and down-slope of the land application area

What are the responsibilities for land or property owners only of onsite wastewater management systems?

It is recommended that the property owner has a service contract with an accredited and trained service technician who will routinely service and maintain the treatment unit in accordance with its maintenance requirements.

Maintenance

You must take all reasonable steps to ensure the system is maintained in good working order. For example:

- regular desludging to remove the contents of the system
- ensuring the integrity of pipes, tanks and storage systems
- repairing and replacing components and fittings of the system
- maintaining the biological and chemical processes integral to the proper functioning of the system
- maintaining the integrity of the land used in connection with the system to ensure access to the system is not impeded
- complying with any system manufacturer's specifications and recommendations
- complying with any Council requirements
- monitoring the system for signs of failure.

Documentation

- If you have a tenant or if someone else will be managing or in control of the septic tank, you must provide written information regarding the correct operation and maintenance of the system.
- Keep and hold all records of maintenance activities carried out on the system, including any pump-out and service records, for five years after each activity. You are required to provide this record to Council if requested.

Treatment Plant and Effluent Disposal Maintenance

Regular maintenance of a wastewater management system can extend the lifespan of the system from a minimum of 15 years to a range of 20 to 30 years.

Around the septic tank:

- All treatment plants should be maintained in accordance with the manufacturer's recommendations.
- All onsite wastewater treatment plants should be fitted with outlet filters, which are cleaned at least quarterly.

- Inspection points and grease traps should be checked quarterly for noxious odour and signs of failure, such as unusually high water levels.
- Sludge and scum levels within the primary settling tank should be maintained at or below 50% of the operational capacity of the treatment tank.
- The scum layer should not block the wastewater outflow.
- Avoid planting trees close to your septic tank and keep the tank clear of vegetation.
- If the alarm on your pump well or package treatment plant is triggered, seek assistance from a licenced plumber or service agent immediately.
- Do not connect water outlets such as storm water drains to your septic tank.
- The scum layer should not block the wastewater outflow.
- If the lid of the septic system is broken, ensure it is repaired immediately to avoid storm water invasion.
- Ensure the septic system is de-sludged every 3-5 years depending on use, by a qualified licensed plumbing practitioner.

Around the effluent disposal area:

- Vegetate the land application areas immediately after installing the system with suitable plants.
- Protect the vegetation growing in the area as this will support the uptake of wastewater.
- Divert storm water away from the effluent disposal area. If the field is flooded, the soil will not be able to absorb the wastewater,
- Isolate the land application areas from
- Check the signs erected to inform occupiers and visitors of the land application area every four months.
- Do not drive cars or allow stock over any part of the system. This can compact the soil and damage the effluent disposal system;
- Do not build any structures or paving, including patios, children's playgrounds, house extensions, pools or sheds, above or near your tank or effluent disposal area.
- If there is any sign of water pooling on the surface of the effluent disposal area, seek assistance from a licensed plumbing practitioner or service agent immediately.

Household tips

The main causes of problems with onsite wastewater treatment systems include:

- Introducing too much water into the wastewater system.
- Allowing incompatible chemicals and materials to enter the system that then interfere with the operation of your system.
- Too many fats and oils getting into the system then clogging up your pipes and disposal system.

To reduce sludge building up in the tank:

- scrape all dishes to remove fats, grease and food scraps before washing
- use a sink strainer to limit food waste from entering the treatment plant
- keep all possible solids out of the system
- don't use a food waste disposal unit unless the system is specifically designed to carry the extra load
- install a lint filter on your washing machine to avoid blockages
- don't put menstrual products and other hygiene products into the system.

To keep the bacteria working in the tank working well:

- use biodegradable soaps, low-phosphorus detergent and low-sodium detergent
- use detergents in the recommended quantities
- use septic-safe cleaning chemicals at home, don't use powerful bleaches, whiteners, nappy soakers, spot removers and disinfectants
- don't put chemicals or paint down the drain
- don't flush unwanted or expired medication, return these to a pharmacy.
- If you have a blocked drain, use boiling water or an electric eel to clear the line, rather than using caustic soda or another chemical.

Reduce wastewater by:

- installing water conservation fittings, including for toilets, showers and taps.
- use a water efficient washing machine
- taking showers instead of baths
- repair leaking taps and toilets as soon as possible
- washing clothes only when there is a full load.

Avoid overloading the system by spacing out water use, including by:

- don't do all the washing on one day
- don't run the washing machine and dishwasher at the same time.

More Information

More information can be found on the EPA website:

- <https://www.epa.vic.gov.au/about-epa/publications/1976>
- <https://www.epa.vic.gov.au/for-community/environmental-information/water/about-wastewater/how-to-manage-your-own-septic-system>
- <https://www.epa.vic.gov.au/for-community/environmental-information/water/about-wastewater/onsite-wastewater-regulatory-framework>