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CLA Water Quality Group November 2024 Newsletter

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Easy Tips for Maintaining Your Septic System

As we close up our cottages or button up our homes for winter, we may take time to consider maintenance of our septic systems. A properly functioning septic system is imperative in keeping our lake clean and preventing a buildup of bacteria and phosphorus that can pollute the water and aid in the growth of vegetation and cyanobacteria.

The timing of pumping and inspection of our septic systems depend on several factors. First of all, how much use is the system getting? The size of the tank, the size of the household and wastewater generated by the use of appliances such as dishwashers, washing machines, etc. should also be considered. The EPA recommends that a septic system should be pumped every three to five years and a full system inspection should be done every three years. NH DES recommends pumping every two to three years. A professional septic inspector can advise you of any irregularities in the system and need for repair.



Here are some guidelines for good septic system maintenance practices that you can do to ensure that your system will be kept in good working order and last as long as possible.

1. **Use water efficiently:** If you are upgrading or remodeling, consider high efficiency toilets, dishwashers and washing machines. These will limit the amount of water used and therefore limit stress on the system.
2. **Avoid using too much water at one time.** Do not use the dishwasher, shower, and washing machine simultaneously. Spread it out and allow your septic to deal with incoming water and pump it efficiently. Too much water coming into the system at once can force solids into the drainage pipes and clog the system or flood your drain field.
3. **Remember that anything that goes down the drain ends up in your septic system.** Do not flush anything other than human waste and toilet paper down the toilet. Anything else can harm the system.
4. **Do not dispose of chemicals or grease down your sink drain.** Your septic system is maintained by a balance of naturally occurring bacteria. Toxins and chemicals disrupt this bacteria and cause harm to the system.

5. **Maintain your drainfield.** Do not drive, park, plant trees on or cover your drainfield with insoluble materials such as asphalt or cement.

Septic Safe Cleaning Products

- Use biodegradable cleaning products that break down without harm to the environment.
- Avoid products like bleach that break down healthy bacteria.
- Avoid petroleum based products. Products endorsed by the EPA are safe.
- **Examples:** Use good old fashioned cleaning agents like distilled white vinegar, lemon juice, baking soda and borax.

Septic Safe Toilet Paper

- Use paper that easily breaks down and is chlorine free. Do not flush wipes down the toilet because they don't break down and will eventually clog your system.
- **Examples:** Scotts single ply (or generally any single ply), Seventh Generation, or any paper with the "Septic Safe" label.

Septic Safe Laundry Detergent

- Whether liquid or powder it is best to use a biodegradable laundry detergent. It should be free of bleach and harmful chemicals.
- Avoid phosphates, enzymes, surfactant, dyes, brightening agents, parabens, etc.
- Look for "Free and Clear", plant based, green, biodegradable, and eco-friendly.
- **Examples:** Arm and Hammer Free and Clear, Myers Clean Day, Tide Purclean and Seventh Generation free and clear.

Keeping our septic systems in good working order requires a little bit of thought and effort and maybe a change of practice. In the end it is well worth it to prevent a costly mistake and to keep our lake clean.

References

- EPA.gov: Septic Systems Care and Maintenance
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