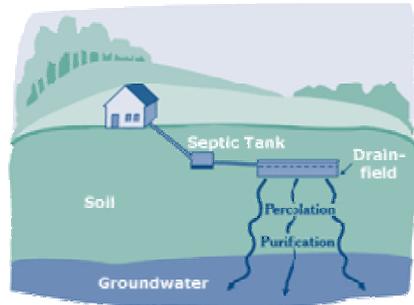


## YOUR SEPTIC SYSTEM

A typical septic system has four main components: a pipe from the home, a septic tank, a drainfield, and the soil. Microbes in the soil digest or remove most contaminants from wastewater before it eventually reaches groundwater. A malfunctioning system can contaminate groundwater that might be a source of your drinking water.



- Did you know that as a homeowner you're responsible for maintaining your septic system?
- Did you know that maintaining your septic system protects your investment in your home?
- Did you know that you should periodically inspect your septic system and pump out the tank?
- If you sell your home, the buyer's mortgage company may also require that the septic system be in good working order.

## Septic System Aliases

- On-lot system
- On-site system
- Individual sewage disposal system
- Onsite sewage disposal system
- Onsite wastewater treatment

## What Does an Inspection Include?

- Locating the system.
- Uncovering access holes.
- Flushing toilets.
- Checking for signs of backup.
- Measuring scum and sludge layers.
- Identifying any leaks.
- Inspecting mechanical components.

## WHY MAINTAIN YOUR SEPTIC SYSTEM?

- Saves money!



Failing septic systems are expensive to repair or replace, and poor maintenance is often the culprit. An unusable septic system or one in disrepair will lower your property's value and could pose a legal liability.

- Prevents the spread of infection and disease

Safe sewage treatment protects water resources. Pathogens, nitrogen, and phosphorus are household sewage byproducts which should be prevented from entering surface and ground water. Pathogens, microorganisms which can cause disease, are normally filtered out by soil particles and destroyed by bacteria in the soil. If the soil system is overloaded, these will flow into surface and ground water. All detergents used in the household should be either *low phosphorus* or *contain no phosphorus*. Nitrogen is normally used by the grass growing above the disposal area. Too much nitrogen overloads the system and will run into any nearby water course or seep into ground water. Excessive nitrogen and phosphorus are aquatic plant nutrients that can cause unsightly algae blooms. Excessive nitrates (a product of nitrogen) in



drinking water can cause pregnancy complications as well as methemoglobinemia (blue baby syndrome) in infancy. A properly working septic system effectively removes most of these pollutants.

## HOW TO MAINTAIN YOUR SEPTIC SYSTEM

Inspect the ground surface in the area of the septic system yourself. Look for wet areas or lush green grass and/or any unpleasant odors. These are indicators of failure. Call a septic system contractor. Have your septic tank pumped by a licensed septic service every 3 years. Failure to do so will ultimately result in system malfunction. Alternative systems with electrical float switches, pumps, or mechanical components need to be inspected more often.



**C**ommercial septic tank additives *do not* eliminate the need for periodic pumping and can be harmful to your system, especially in Morgan County, WV, due to soil composition.

## Use Water Efficiently

Average indoor water use in the typical single-family home is almost 70 gallons per person per day. Dripping faucets waste about 2,000 gallons of water each year. Leaky toilets waste as much as 200 gallons each day. The more water a household conserves, the less water enters the septic system.

- Install high-efficiency showerheads.
- Fill the bathtub with only as much water as you need.
- Turn off faucets while shaving or brushing your teeth.
- Run the dish and clothes washers only when full.
- Make sure all faucets are completely turned off when not in use.
- Maintain your plumbing to eliminate leaks.
- Install faucet aerators in kitchen and bathrooms.

## Flush Responsibly

Dental floss, feminine hygiene products, condoms, diapers, cotton swabs, cigarette butts, coffee grounds, cat litter, paper towels, and other kitchen and bathroom items can clog and potentially damage septic systems. Flushing household chemicals, gasoline, oil, pesticides, antifreeze, and paint can stress or destroy the biological treatment taking place in the system or contaminate surface waters or ground water. **Don't use caustic drain openers for a clogged drain.** Instead, use boiling water or a drain snake to open clogs.



## CARE OF YOUR DRAINFIELD

- Plant only grass over and near your septic system. Roots from nearby trees or shrubs (especially willow trees) can clog and damage the drainfield.
- Don't drive or park vehicles on any part of your septic system and limit livestock access to your drainfield. This compacts soil in your drainfield or damages pipes, tank, or other septic system components.
- Keep roof drains, basement sump pumps, and other rainwater or surface water drainage systems away from the drainfield. Flooding the drainfield with excessive water slows down or stops treatment processes and can cause plumbing fixtures to back up.

**Your septic system is not a trash can!**

## Get Assistance & More Information on Maintaining Your Septic System

**The Morgan County Health Department** 304-258-1513  
187 S. Green Street, Suite 2  
Berkeley Springs, WV 25411

**Sleepy Creek Watershed Association**  
P.O. Box 991  
Berkeley Springs, WV 25411  
www.sleepycreekwatershedassociation.org

**WV Department of Environmental Protection (DEP)** 304-822-7266  
HC 63 Box 2545  
Romney, WV 26757  
www.wvdep.org

**Sleepy Creek Project Team, Eastern Panhandle Conservation District** 304-263-4376 Ext. 117  
151 Aikens Center, Suite 1  
Martinsburg, WV 25404  
www.wvca.us

See the SCWA web site for more resources  
www.sleepycreekwatershedassociation.org

### Membership and Renewal Form

Membership year is from January-December.  
Dues should be paid by the first of the year.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Individual — \$10  Group/Org — \$25

Family — \$15  Sponsor — \$100

Mail to: SCWA, Treasurer  
P.O. Box 991, Berkeley Springs, WV 25411

### WHAT CAN MAKE YOUR SYSTEM FAIL?

If the amount of wastewater entering the system is more than the system can handle, the wastewater backs up into the house or yard and creates a health hazard.



Suspect a system failure not only when a foul odor is emitted but also when partially treated wastewater flows up to the ground surface and vegetation turns bright green. **By the time you can smell or see a problem, however, the damage may already be done.**

### Common reasons for septic system failures

- Hot tubs—large quantities of water from your hot tub stirs the solids in the tank and pushes them out into the drainfield, causing it to clog and fail. Instead, drain cooled hot tub water onto turf or landscaped areas well away from the septic tank and drainfield.



- Water purification systems—some freshwater purification systems, including softeners, unnecessarily pump water into the septic system contributing hundreds of gallons of water to the septic tank. This causes agitation of solids and excess flow to the drainfield.

Seek alternative routing for such freshwater treatment systems.

- Garbage disposals increase the amount of grease and solids entering the septic tank possibly clogging the drainfield; frequent use can significantly increase the accumulation of sludge and scum in your septic tank, resulting in the need for more frequent pumping. Try composting instead.



- Household toxics—oil-based and latex paint, solvents, toxic cleaners. Squeeze all excess paint and stain from brushes and rollers on several layers of newspaper before rinsing.
- Household cleaners—**read the labels:**



**Danger/Poison** = highly hazardous

**Warning** = moderately hazardous

**Caution** = slightly hazardous

**Nontoxic/Septic Safe** = categories created by advertisers to sell products. Try some of the homemade, nontoxic, organic cleaning products (see the SCWA web

site for more information).

- Neglecting to pump the septic tank every three years will eventually result in failure of the system.

### Tips & Warnings

- If you do not know where your septic system is located, call the Morgan County Health Department first who may have a drawing showing the location. If they do not know, call a plumber or septic contractor.
- Call a plumber **immediately** if more than one toilet in your home backs up simultaneously. This could be an indication of a serious problem with your septic tank.
- Suspect problems if you see a wet or bright green area in your lawn. Grass grows greener over a septic system or drainfield.

*Stop, look, and smell!*



**Sleepy Creek Watershed Association**  
Protecting and Preserving Sleepy Creek in Morgan County, WV

## How to Maintain Your Septic System



A watershed is all the land area that drains to a given body of water.

**We all live in a watershed!**

This brochure was made possible through the generosity of the West Virginia Stream Partners Program ( WV SPP). The WV SPP is a cooperative effort of DEP, DNR, the Division of Forestry, and the WV Conservation Agency.

P.O. Box 991  
Berkeley Springs, WV 25411  
sleepycreekwatershedassociation.org