

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

WHY SHOULD I LOOK AFTER MY SEPTIC SYSTEM?

- You have a legal and social responsibility to maintain your septic system in good working order.
- A neglected septic tank is a serious health risk and causes harm to the environment.
- Your tank will have to be emptied (de-sludged) less often, saving you money.
- If the system fails it will be expensive to repair.

WHERE DO I FIND MY SEPTIC TANK?

- Look for a metal or concrete lid - this may be overgrown or have become covered with soil.
- Your tank will normally be downhill from your property.
- Your title deeds or local knowledge may help.
- Your tank may not be on your land and may be shared with neighbouring properties.

WHAT CHECKS SHOULD I MAKE?

- **Household drainage** Are the drains slow to clear or toilets backing up? This indicates blocked pipes, a full tank or a blocked soakaway.
- **Tank** Maintain an accessible, well-fitting cover. This is essential for your safety. There should be no smell from the tank. If your tank never needs to be emptied it may be leaking.
- **Soakaway** If the soakaway is swampy, smelly or has prolific grass growth it has become clogged.
- **Discharge** If possible, check the end of the discharge pipe. A pale liquid with little or no smell is normal. If the discharge is dark, smelly or contains solids there is a problem.
- **Vegetation** Deep-rooting trees and shrubs can damage your system. Keep them at least 30 m from the tank, soakaway and drains. Keep nearby vegetation mown short.

If you suspect a problem, act quickly and call a plumber or drainage specialist if necessary.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD I HAVE MY TANK EMPTIED?

If your septic tank has not been emptied in the last year you should make the recommended checks immediately.

If in doubt, have your tank emptied. If you delay emptying your tank you risk ruining your soakaway and polluting the environment.

A build up of sludge is the most likely cause of problems.

HOW CAN I REDUCE THE NEED TO HAVE MY TANK EMPTIED?

All tanks need to be emptied. How often depends on the number of users, the size of the tank and how well you care for your system.

Follow the DOs and DON'Ts guide overleaf to keep your system in good working order.

WHAT SHOULD I CHECK IF I'M BUYING A PROPERTY WITH A SEPTIC TANK?

- Have there been any problems with the system?
- Is there evidence that the tank has been maintained and emptied regularly?
- Is the septic tank in good structural order?
- Is the soakaway functioning properly?
- Is there any evidence of flooding or pollution?
- Has the discharge been approved / registered?

If in any doubt, arrange an inspection of the drains, septic tank and soakaway by a qualified surveyor.

DO I NEED TO REGISTER MY TANK?

Different countries have different regulations and procedures:

England: Under review (no charge).

Northern Ireland: Yes (a charge applies).

Scotland: Yes (a charge applies).

Wales: Yes (no charge in most cases).

WHO TO CONTACT EMPTYING AND MAINTENANCE

Contractors are listed under:

- Drain and pipe cleaning
- Plumbers
- Septic tanks
- Sewage consultants
- Waste disposal services

THE SEPTIC TANK GUIDE

INFORMATION, ADVICE AND REGISTRATION

Department of the Environment (Northern Ireland)

028 9262 3181

waterinfo@doeni.gov.uk

www.doeni.gov.uk

Environment Agency (England)

03708 506 506

enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk

www.environment-agency.gov.uk

Natural Resources Wales

0300 065 3000

enquiries@naturalresourceswales.gov.uk

www.naturalresourceswales.gov.uk

Scottish Environment Protection Agency

01738 448414

www.sepa.org.uk

www.theseptictankguide.info

This leaflet is produced by the Dee Catchment Partnership who are working together for the sustainable management of the River Dee catchment in N.E. Scotland.

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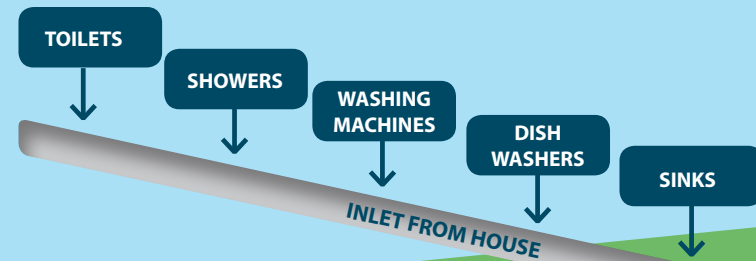
Make friends with your septic tank!

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HOW DOES MY SEPTIC TANK WORK?

If your property is not served by a public sewerage system, then your sewage and waste water are probably treated by a septic tank.

Waste water from toilets, sinks, showers and household appliances drains to your septic tank. The number of people using your system, the amount of water you use, the size of your tank and what you put down the drains all affect how well your system works and how often your tank needs to be emptied.



- ✗ RAINWATER DRAINAGE**
Too much water flushes effluent through the tank before the bacteria can work and saturates the soakaway. Solids get washed into the soakaway and pollute the discharge. The water carries soil and grit into the tank, filling it up.
- ✗ KITCHEN TOWELS, SANITARY ITEMS, COTTON BUDS, CONDOMS, NAPPIES, MOIST TOILET TISSUE, WIPES**
These can block your drains. They are not broken down in the tank, and so cause the sludge to build up more quickly.
- ✗ OILS, GREASE, FAT**
These will solidify and block your drains. They are not broken down in the tank, and so cause the sludge to build up more quickly. Fats 'waterproof' the soakaway, stopping it from working.
- ✗ BLEACHES, PAINTS, DISINFECTANTS, PESTICIDES, MEDICINES, SOLVENTS, CAUSTIC SODA, DRAIN CLEANERS**
These kill the bacteria in your tank (stopping the system from digesting waste) and pollute the environment.
- ✗ HOUSEHOLD CLEANING PRODUCTS CONTAINING PHOSPHATES**
Phosphates are a major pollutant of watercourses. Septic tanks do not remove them so low phosphate products must be used.

Sewage solids are retained by the tank.

Your septic tank is a living ecosystem where beneficial bacteria digest sewage. The resulting solids need to be removed (de-sludged/emptied) regularly by a specialist contractor.

Liquid effluent flows out of the tank.

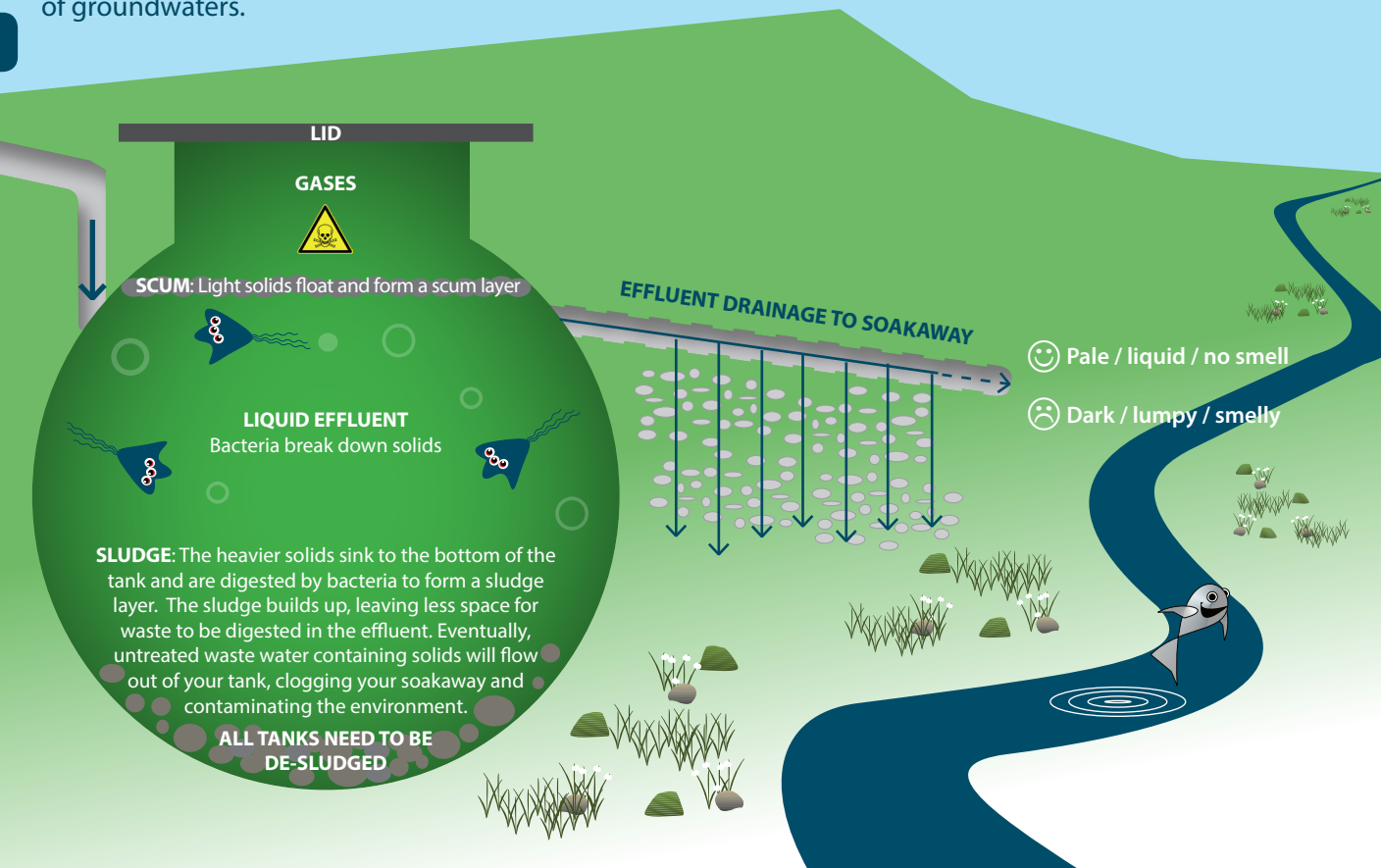
This effluent contains potentially harmful substances:

- Bacteria (from the faeces in the tank) pose a potentially serious health risk.
- Phosphates (from sewage and household cleaning products) are a major pollutant of watercourses. They are not removed by septic tanks.
- Nitrates (from sewage) can be a major pollutant of groundwaters.

The effluent usually drains into the ground via a soakaway (drainage field) where it is cleansed and filtered by the soil.

However, some older septic tanks do not have a soakaway and discharge effluent directly to a stream/river/lake (not permitted in Northern Ireland or Wales), or the sea. In these cases the effluent is a significant risk to human health and the environment and an alternative or additional form of waste treatment or storage is usually required.

If the effluent from your tank discharges to a stream, river, lake or the sea, you should discuss this with your relevant authority.



DOs and DON'Ts

- ✓ Find your septic tank, the soakaway and/or the discharge point.
- ✓ Check all parts of your septic system regularly.
- ✓ Ensure all lids are secure and in good working order. Never lift any lid - the gases and bacteria are extremely dangerous.
- ✓ Have your tank emptied regularly - keep a record of all emptying and maintenance.
- ✓ Protect your soakaway - do not drive over it, build a structure on top of it, or cover it with concrete or Tarmac. Gravel is OK for foot traffic. Sow grass over the soakaway area if possible.
- ✓ Only use household products labelled 'suitable for septic tanks' to avoid upsetting the bacterial balance of your tank.
- ✓ Only use household products labelled 'environmentally friendly', 'low phosphate' or 'suitable for septic tanks'.
- ✓ Use household cleaning products in moderate amounts - try using less detergent in your washing machine and dishwasher.
- ✓ Try to use less water - space out laundry/dishwasher loads to avoid lots of water washing through the system at once.
- ✓ Use a sink strainer as food scraps cause sludge to build up more quickly - put them in your compost bin.
- ✗ Never flush anything other than bodily waste and toilet paper down the toilet - put everything else in the rubbish bin.
- ✗ Never dispose of grease or cooking oil down any drain - wipe out pans, pour fat into a container and put it in a bin.
- ✗ Never put paints, solvents or any chemicals down any drain - dispose of them at a civic amenity site.
- ✗ Don't use caustic soda or drain cleaners to clear blockages - try boiling water instead.
- ✗ Never connect rainwater drainage pipes into your septic tank.