

*** Arrange emptying of the sludge often enough to prevent damage to the soak away system.**

Determine emptying frequency on sludge levels and **NOT** on whether the system is blocked and unable to work. Once sludge has entered land drains it is difficult to regain their porosity. It's recommended that tanks are emptied annually.

*** Prevent unnecessary surface water gaining access to the system.**

Divert any rainwater into a separate soak-away or ditch as clean water requires no treatment and may overload the system. Check the tank walls during emptying for ground water penetration and carry out remedial works if required.

*** Keep harmful chemicals out of the system as far as possible.**

The bacteria in your tank are helping to purify the sewage and if they are killed by excessive use of bleach or other bactericides the system will break down. Keep the use of detergents to a minimum as these chemicals impair the sedimentation process.

*** Consider the effects on the system from any alterations to your premises.**

Additional sanitary fittings, washing machines and dishwashers will result in extra sludge and in turn, more frequent emptying. Extensions, garages etc must not prevent the emptying tanker getting to within 200 feet of the system.

Purchasing a property

If considering buying a house with a septic tank system, ensure the drainage field is inspected prior to signing contracts and ask the householder if a maintenance log is available. With new houses, ensure you have a warranty which covers the system. With other properties, a site inspection which includes the whole system should be carried out by a competent surveyor. Your building society or bank valuation report is unlikely to cover this aspect adequately.

Further information:

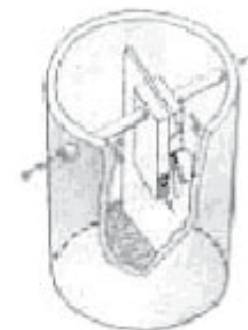
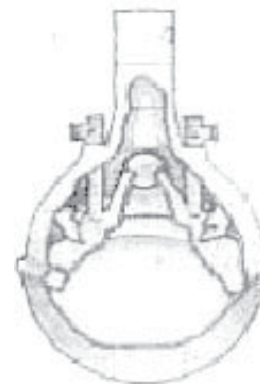
There are a number of contractors that should be able to inspect your system and inform you of any problems and if necessary, undertake any work required. These will be listed in the phone book under septic tanks, water, waste, environmental consultants and sewage.

**The Environment Agency enquiry line
Tel: 08708 506 506**

Environmental Health Team at
East Cambridgeshire District Council
Tel: 01353 665555

ECDC 03/04

Information on **Septic tanks and Cesspools**



East Cambridgeshire
District Council

Introduction

This leaflet gives a basic introduction to septic tanks and cesspools. These drainage systems are adequate, provided they are installed and maintained correctly.

What is a Cesspool?

A cesspool is a sealed underground holding tank, which stores sewage until it is pumped out and disposed of.

Cesspools must be covered and watertight to prevent the ingress of ground or surface water and the leakage of foul water. Under the provisions of the Public Health Act 1936, it is an offence to allow a cesspool to overflow or leak, and if prosecuted, a fine and daily penalty may be imposed. In addition, if the cesspool is found to be causing pollution to a watercourse the Environment Agency (E.A) can take legal action under the Water Resources Act 1991, which on prosecution in a Magistrates Court could result in a fine up to £20,000 and/or three months imprisonment.

Cesspools should therefore be sited carefully so there is no risk of pollution, particularly to water supplies. They should be at least 15m (50ft) away from any inhabited building and 10m (33ft) from any watercourse.

What is a Septic Tank?

A septic tank partially treats sewage naturally by making use of bacteria to break down the solid matter. The solids then form a sludge at the bottom of the tank and the liquid usually passes through into an underground soak away system, allowing the effluent to soak into the ground, provided it doesn't generate flooding or a pollution risk to surface or ground waters.

A septic tank should be emptied when necessary – usually once a year and must be watertight, adequately ventilated and not located where pollution may be caused. Products such as bleach, chemical cleaners and biological washing powders should be avoided or used sparingly as these reduce biological activity and can therefore affect the efficiency of the system. The advised distances from buildings and watercourses are the same as for a cesspool, as is the legislation.

Septic tanks – problems

* **Overloading** – more people equals more sewage. To rectify this it may be that a new, bigger system and/or soak away is required.

* **Frequency of emptying** – if solids enter the soak away it will become blocked and ineffective, however, if the tank is emptied too often the bacteria won't establish themselves.

* **Damaged/inadequate Soak away** – if the soak away is broken the effluent will not be dispersed evenly and therefore not drain away correctly. If a new soak away is to be constructed the percolation test should be carried out, details of which are available from the E.A.

Indicators of problems with your system:

- slowly draining sinks, toilets, baths etc
- tank covers lifted by overflowing solids
- backing-up of sewage at the inlet
- surface flooding "downstream" of the tank
- nettles and vigorous plant growth downstream
- ground movement near the tank or drainage field
- polluted water in ditch or watercourse
- a smell of sewage in the area!

Guide to a more trouble free operation of septic tanks:

* Understand how the system works

Most systems involve settlement by gravity, the action of micro-organisms and dispersion of the effluent into the sub-soil.

* Locate all the manholes, pipe runs and tanks

Knowledge of the position of the system within the garden will prevent unnecessary damage to pipe work and aid emptying and maintenance.

* Check the sludge level at regular intervals

At least three times a year dip the tank to check the sludge level as if this enters the sub-soil drains they will lose their porosity.