



LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY Health Department

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Managing Your Septic System During/Following a Flood

If your home or the area around it has flooded, your septic tank may fill with water that leaks in through the lid. Rising ground water may enter around the inlet or outlet, or your drainfield may become saturated and unable to drain. Water entering the tank or a saturated drainfield may cause sewage to back up into your home, depending on the elevation of your septic system relative to the lowest drains or toilets.

Diseases can be transmitted to humans from wastewater if appropriate protective measures are not taken.

Wastewater contains human disease-causing pathogens such as bacteria, viruses, and parasites. Safe disposal of wastewater is essential to protect your health and the health of others. **Keep children and pets away from sewage or wastewater-affected areas!**

The immediate concern during and after flooding is exposure to pathogens and damage to your floors, walls, or furnishings from the water. A longer-term concern is that flooding of the septic tank may wash out solids from the tank back into the sewer pipe, causing blockages or system damage.

Keep safety in mind at all times. Older septic tanks can collapse if pumped while covered with flood water, and any septic tank can float out of the ground if it is pumped out during very high ground water conditions. Also, some onsite wastewater treatment systems use electrical equipment, such as pumps, that can short out or be damaged by flooding. Call professional help if you need it!

What should I do if I suspect my septic tank has been flooded?

Do not use or flush your toilet until you know that the septic tank and associated sewer pipes are intact. Otherwise wastewater could flow back up into the house through the toilet, shower, bath, and laundry drains.

If you suspect your wastewater system has been physically damaged by the flood, contact a licensed septic system installer or a licensed plumber to have it assessed.

Septic tanks inundated with flood water should be professionally pumped after the flood emergency has subsided. Pumping should be delayed until flood waters have receded and the water table has lowered.

Contact the local health department (447-8351) for a list of licensed septic tank pumpers in your area or look in the Yellow Pages under "*Septic Tanks-Cleaning.*"

Take care cleaning or pumping out a flooded septic tank because this could cause the tank to float out of the ground and damage the tank or sewer pipes. In some cases, it may be necessary to fill a pumped septic tank with water to prevent it from floating out of the ground.

If your drainfield area is waterlogged or clogged, additional water will not drain and will pool on the surface. You may need to pump out the whole septic system (septic tank and drainfield), possibly several times. Saturated soil is especially susceptible to compaction, which can lead to system failure. Avoid compacting the soil over the drainfield area by driving or operating equipment over it.

In most situations, you may need to turn off power to your pump if it is flooded to prevent it from overheating, wearing out, or pumping out untreated water. In some cases, you may need to leave the pump on to prevent other types of damage. Contact a licensed septic system installer or plumber for advice.

What should I do if sewage has overflowed inside my home?

Sewage contains harmful bacteria, viruses, and parasites. Sewage needs to be cleaned up as soon as possible. Keep children and pets away from the area until this is done. Some appropriate clean-up procedures are:

- Use rubber gloves, boots, and eye protection.
- Remove and discard contaminated household materials that cannot be cleaned or disinfected, such as carpet and children's soft toys.
- Clean all contaminated areas with hot water and detergent, then disinfect. Pay special attention to cooking utensils, work surfaces, and other surfaces such as floors and walls.
- Dip utensils in a solution of 1.5 cups of household chlorine bleach in 2 gallons of cold water (a household bucket) for 2 minutes. Rinse in clean water.
- For disinfecting hard surfaces, use the same solution and leave the surface wet for 10 minutes. Rinse off with clean water.
- Disinfect cleaning mops, brooms, and brushes with the bleach solution.
- Clean and dry dirty shoes and wash your clothes separately after clean-up.
- Increase ventilation inside the house.
- Throw out food containers that have been in contact with sewage, including unopened bottles.
- Attend to any cuts and wounds immediately. Disinfect the wound and then cover with a waterproof dressing.
- Wash your hands and other affected parts of your body with soap and water.

What should I do if sewage has overflowed outside my home?

- Report the spill to the Environmental Services Division of the Lewis & Clark City-County Health Department, 447- 8351.
- **After flood waters have diminished and standing water has receded**, cover the surface of the sewage spill with garden lime, following manufacturer's warnings. Avoid getting lime on your skin and clothing. Wear rubber gloves and boots.
- Use a rake or shovel to mix the lime into areas where the spill is thick.
- After 24 hours, rake up the thicker residue into plastic bags and dispose of in the trash.
- Use a hose to rinse the lime into the soil.
- Block access to the area until sunlight thoroughly dries it.

For more information, contact the Environmental Services Division of the Lewis & Clark City-County Health Department, 447- 8351. More flood information is available online at www.co.lewis-clark.mt.us/flooding.

The Lewis & Clark City-County Health Department's mission is to improve and protect the health of all Lewis & Clark County residents.