

Problems with Your Wastewater System: A Guide to Solving Common Problems

Problems with a wastewater system are not always obvious. In most cases, you will not know that there is a problem with your wastewater (septic) system until sewage is backing up in the house or you find a wet, smelly area in your yard. The following are a few suggestions to help determine what is wrong with your system.

If your septic system is backing up or you feel you have an urgent need for assistance, contact a septic pumping/cleaning company. See the section “**Contacting a Septic Pumping/Cleaning Company**”.

✓ **Evaluation**

- If you are not familiar with the septic system in your home, you may want to find out more about your system. Call Johnson County Public Health (319) 356-6040 or come to the health department office to obtain information about your wastewater system. The county holds records on all permitted wastewater systems constructed after 1964. Environmental Health Specialists at the public health office can answer general questions about system design and installation.
- Check to see if you have a **septic tank filter** that needs maintenance. Filters are installed to keep solids from leaving the septic tank and clogging the secondary treatment unit (usually a pressure-dosed mound or sand filter); the flow of wastewater becomes restricted, and eventually stops, as solids build up on the filter. If a filter is present, it will be inside a 4”-6” diameter pipe sticking up above the septic tank. Follow the manufacturer’s instructions on how to rinse it off to remove the buildup. Call Johnson County Public Health (319) 356-6040 or a septic pumping/cleaning company if you are unsure whether you have a septic tank filter or have questions about filter cleaning.
- The most common type of system failure is *over-saturation of the absorption field*. This can be caused by anything from overuse of water to total clogging due to lack of maintenance and/or advanced age of the system. Symptoms of this problem are a wet and/or smelly spot in the yard. The cause of this type of problem can be complicated to diagnose. Contact Johnson County Public Health (319) 356-6040 or a septic cleaning/pumping company to help you identify why your absorption field is over-saturated.

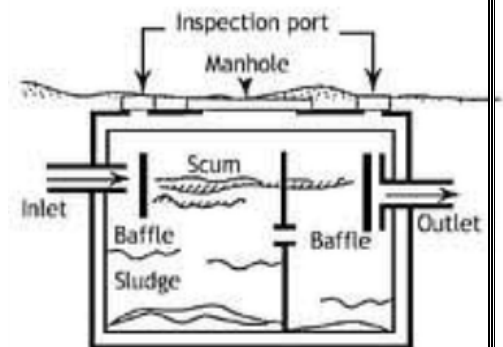
✓ **Contacting a Septic Pumping/Cleaning Company**

If you have already performed the evaluation of your septic system, do not have a septic filter, and/or wastewater is backing up, there may be a structural problem with your system. Contact a septic pumping/cleaning company (look under “Septic” in the phone book). The pumping company may do one or more of the following:

- Locate the septic tank, expose the system, and pump out the tank’s contents
- Inspect the tank for structural defects that may be causing the problem
- Run a sewer “snake” through the connecting piping to clean out blockages
- Locate the secondary treatment area and distribution box(s) to check for clogging
- Run a camera through the system to look for structural defects

If an inspection by a pump/cleaner company or a wastewater system contractor indicates that the distribution box and the absorption lines are full of water, there is a good chance that the system will require a major repair to work properly. We DO NOT recommend “jetting” the absorption lines. Jetting removes the excess water from the lines, but does not take care of the under-lying problem that caused the lines to plug, so the problem will probably reappear within a few months.

***Note:** Be aware that these are the steps that are taken for locating problems with a “conventional” septic tank/absorption field type of wastewater system. Most, but not all, “non-conventional” wastewater system problems would be investigated in a similar manner.



✓ **Repair and Replacement of a Wastewater System**

If a septic company determines that you need to alter your existing system, or that you need a new septic system, you will need to apply for a permit from Johnson County Public Health. For more information on permits, contact Johnson County Public Health **(319) 356-6040**.

*You may be eligible for a low interest loan for the repair or replacement of your existing wastewater system through the Iowa Onsite Wastewater Assistance Program (OSWAP). Contact Johnson County Public Health **(319) 356-6040** or visit the OSWAP website for more information: www.state.ia.us/epd/wastewtr/septic/onsite.htm.

Johnson County Public Health

855 S Dubuque Street Iowa City, IA 52240

(319)-356-6040

Hours: 8am-4pm M-F

www.johnson-county.com/publichealth/index.shtml