



Onsite Wastewater, or Septic, System flooding occurs when a conventional drain field has been super-saturated by rain, rising lake, stream, or river water. In aerobic treatment units or media filters, flooding occurs when the aerobic tank(s) fill with floodwater and cease to function. In either case, signs that your system may have a problem are slow, gurgling, or overflowing drains or toilets. Raw sewage may also back up into the shower and bath drains.

## What steps should I take if I suspect my septic system is flooded?

1. If possible, do not use the system while the drain field or tanks are covered with water. The wastewater will not be treated and will become a source of pollution. Conserve water as much as possible while the system attempts to restore itself and the water table falls.
2. If your system contains electric components, such as an effluent or air pumps or an aerobic treatment system, switch off breakers or disconnect power to the system. **Avoid** contact with any electric pump or equipment that is submerged during a flood.
3. Take measures to prevent silt from entering the tanks (i.e. water tight tanks and connections). If the pump chamber becomes flooded, silt has a tendency to settle in the chamber and ultimately clog the drainfield or damage the pump. Aerobic treatment units or media filters may also become clogged due to mud and sediment.
4. Do not dig into the tank or drainfield area while the soil is still wet or flooded. Try to avoid using any heavy machinery near the drainfield or tanks in a saturated state, as they are especially vulnerable to damage during flooded conditions. Such activity may permanently ruin the soil's ability to renovate the effluent.
5. Flooding of the septic tank usually lifts the floating crust of fats and grease in the septic tank. Some of this scum may float and partially clog the outlet tee. If the septic system backs up into the house, check the tank first for outlet blockage. Clean any floodwater in the house without dumping it into the sink or toilet, and allow enough time for the water to recede.

Floodwaters in a house that are passed through or pumped through the septic tank will cause higher-than-normal flows through the system. As a result, the risk of outlet tee clogging increases dramatically.

## **What should I do after the flood waters recede?**

1. If you also have a drinking water well, do *not* drink the water until it has been tested by your county health department. Call your county health unit for more information on well water testing.
2. Do not use the sewage system until the water in the soil absorption field is lower than the water level at any point around the house.
3. Have your septic tank professionally inspected and serviced, if you suspect damage. Signs of damage include visible settling or the ground above the tank or an inability of the system to accept additional water. **Most onsite wastewater systems are not damaged by flooding**, since they are below ground and completely covered. However, septic tanks and pump chambers can fill with silt and soil and must then be cleaned. If the soil absorption field is clogged with silt, a new system may have to be installed as there is no effective way to clean out the buried lines in an absorption field.
4. System components, including electrical connections and control panels, should be cleaned, assessed for damage, and serviced by a trained specialist.
5. Have your tanks repaired or cleaned by trained specialists, as the tanks may contain dangerous gases and germs. In addition, pumping out a tank that is located in saturated soil may cause it to "float" out of the ground.

For more information, call your county health unit, or 1-800-462-0599