



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 drain field may become saturated and unable to drain. Water entering the tank or a saturated drain field may cause sewage to back up into your home, depending on the elevation of your septic system relative to the lowest drains or toilets.

Wastewater can transmit diseases to people and pets if you don't take appropriate protective measures.

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 germs 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 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 a flood emergency has subsided. Pumping should be delayed until flood waters have receded and the water table has lowered.

Contact RiverStone Health, Environmental Health Services at 256.2770 for a list of licensed septic tank pumpers in Yellowstone County. Or look on-line or in the Yellow Pages for "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.

If your drain field area is waterlogged or clogged, stop using the system as much as possible and let it dry out. Otherwise, household waste may overflow into your home or yard. Call a professional to pump the system.

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 RiverStone Health, Environmental Health Services at 256.2770.

For more information, contact RiverStone Health, Environmental Health Services at 256.2770.