

Weird, Unusual Causes of Septic Tank Failures

Everybody knows to not put drain cleaners or oil down the drain into a septic tank, but what are some of the weird other things that can mess up your septic system and leach field?

First off, remember that your septic tank will work only if the bacteria in it are healthy and hungry. If they get sick or die, your septic tank will start sending un-digested waste out to the drain field which will quickly plug it up. So, what are some of the weird, unexpected causes of septic tank failure?

Chemotherapy Drugs

Chemotherapy is a necessary, but often very uncomfortable, treatment for many cancer patients. Few people realize that powerful chemo drugs, once they have passed through the patient, often still have enough activity to bring a septic tank to its knees. A person undergoing chemo has a difficult enough time without having the drains suddenly back up or a stinking pond develop in the back yard.

One solution is to keep chemo-contaminated urine and poop out of the septic tank, by whatever means possible. Failing that, you may need to schedule more frequent pumping of the tank during the course of chemo treatment.

Hand Washing Soap

Liquid hand soaps are convenient, but usually contain anti-bacterial chemicals. These don't stop killing bacteria when they reach your tank. Children often over-use liquid hand soaps. A bar of soap is more economical and will send much less bactericide to your tank.

Toilet Bowl Cleaners

Every septic tank pumper has seen a dead tank full of blue water. The source of the blue is from automatic toilet cleaners that you can buy at the grocery store, which send deadly (to your bacteria) chemicals to your septic tank every time you flush.

Meth Labs

If you run an illegal methamphetamine lab, you probably flush a lot of yellow or pink tablets down the toilet. Be aware that these colors do not disappear in the tank, where they are often accompanied by a strong ammonia odor.

Bath Oils, Body Oils

Bath and body oils may make your skin feel smoother, but when they wash down the drain they increase the chances of septic tank failure.

Dishwashers

Many of us find it hard to live without a dishwasher. The bacteria in our septic tanks find it hard to live with one. Dishwashers send a surge of water to the septic system, but generally not enough to disturb a properly-operating tank. You can reduce the load on your septic tank by scraping loose food waste off your dishes into the trash (NOT into the garbage disposal / carburetor) before loading them into the dishwasher.

Hot Tubs / Spas

Owners frequently keep plenty of chlorine or bromine in their hot tubs (spas), in order to kill any germs that might spread between the users. If they decide to drain all that toxic water into the septic system, it can likewise kill or "stun" the beneficial bacteria and stop the digestion process. If it's legal in your area, you should consider draining your spa onto the yard instead of the sewer.

This is much less of a concern with so-called "Luv Tubs," which are large bathtubs. These hold less water than hot tubs, and owners generally don't add chlorine or bromine to them.

Water Softeners

Water softeners add sodium (Na) to household water. Researchers are divided on whether sodium is harmful to septic systems. One concern is that it causes the sludge in a septic tank to swell, the other is that it clogs the pores in clay soils.

If the sludge in the bottom of a septic tank swells, it is more likely to go out the tank discharge line and into the drain field (leach field). If this happens, the undigested sludge will clog the field.

If, as some believe, the sodium also closes up the pores in the clay, then your leach field will no longer be able to drain effectively and you will get stopped-up drains or an unwelcome pond in your yard. Until ongoing research determines if sodium is really bad or not, our advice is to avoid using a water softener if you can.

Time-Release Pills and Capsules

Some time release medicines consist of a porous, inert pill or capsule that has been infused with the active ingredient. Think of a hard little sponge, full of medicine, that does not digest. When you eliminate this pill, it gets flushed down the toilet and out into your septic tank. From there it travels out to your drain field, where it can plug one of the holes that let water out of the pipe. Each pill or capsule can plug one hole, so after a few bottles of medicine your entire drain field may grind to a halt.

Ground Water and Rain Water

Reducing the amount of water going to your septic tank is important to ensuring its long life. However, a surprising number of homes have their basement sump pumps and even roof drains piped to the septic system. These can put thousands of extra gallons into the tank, pushing it far beyond its design limit. The excess water will tend to stir up sludge on the bottom of the tank and cause it to flow out to the drain field, where it can stop up things forever.

Rainwater and groundwater are clean (unless your ground water is polluted), and clean water should be applied to the yard, not into the septic system and not onto any part of the yard that is over the septic tank or its drain field (leach field).

Conclusion

Here is a quick way to evaluate the effect that chemicals will have on your septic tank. First off, when you see a phrase like "Septic Tank Safe" on a bottle, realize that it doesn't mean anything. There is no legal standard for what is OK to put into a septic system and what is not.

[One highly-regarded septic tank scientist has published this cheat sheet for homeowners:](#)

Danger -- If you see this word on the label of a chemical, it means the chemical will kill the bacteria in your septic tank. Avoid it, or use as little as possible.

Warning -- Means limited use should have a minimal effect on your septic system.

Caution -- Generally means the chemical will have little effect on your septic tank.

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