

# Septic Tanks

The facts & legislation update



## What is a septic tank?

A septic tank collects wastewater and sewage from a property that is not connected to the main sewer system.

## How does it work?

- Wastewater enters the underground tank from an inlet pipe and gradually separates.
- Solids settle at the bottom, oils and greases form a layer of scum at the top, and the liquid matter remains in the middle.
- This clarified wastewater exits via an outlet pipe into a drain field or into a surface watercourse (stream, ditch, river, etc)
- The remaining scum and solids in the tank are broken down into sludge by naturally occurring bacteria.

## What are the rules?

- The householder is responsible for meeting the Environment Agency's 'general binding rules' of owning a septic tank.
- These state that the sewage must be domestic in nature, and must not cause pollution.
- The septic tank must be emptied and checked at least annually by a qualified waste handler and an auditable paper trail kept. Timescales will depend on the variables of each installation.

## Septic tank problems

Problems are usually caused by householder misuse, such as:

- Not keeping the drainage field protected and operational
- Putting inappropriate items and chemicals into the system (some cleaning products can kill off the natural bacteria, upsetting the eco balance of the system)
- Not having the tank emptied and checked regularly by a specialist contractor

## Changes to the rules

In January 2015, the rules changed so that existing septic tanks which discharge to watercourses must be upgraded to a full sewage treatment plant by 1st January 2020, or before the property is sold if that is before the deadline. Visit the website below for all the details on the latest legislation

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/general-binding-rules-small-sewage-discharge-to-the-ground>



## Ask the experts

UKDN Waterflow (LG) offers independent advice and pre-sale inspections and surveys of drains and septic tanks for litigation and insurance claims, anywhere in the UK. Call 0333 344 2937

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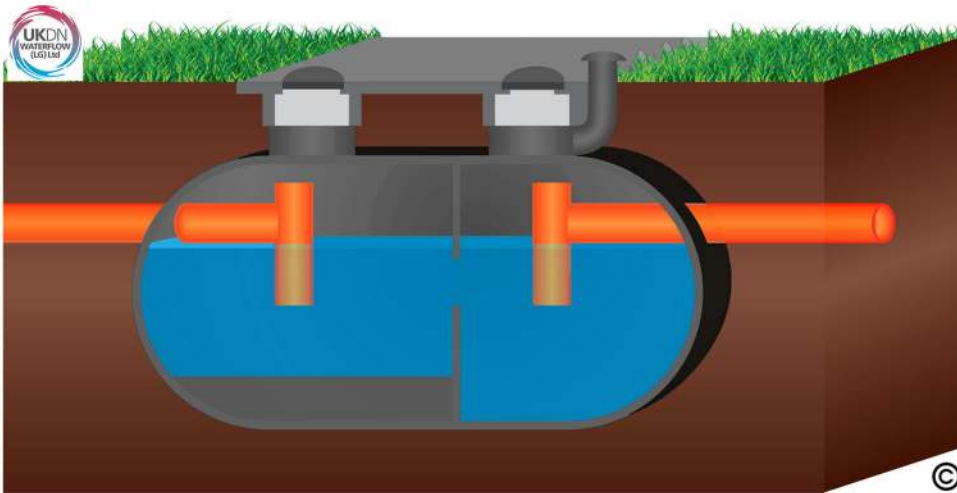
# What is a septic tank?

A septic tank is used for collecting and treating wastewater on a property that is not connected to the main sewer system.

They are installed underground, and make use of natural processes to treat the sewage they collect. Typically made up of two chambers or compartments, septic tanks receive wastewater from an inlet pipe.

The wastewater enters the first chamber and separates over time, with solids settling at the bottom, oils and greases forming a layer of scum at the top, and a layer of relatively clear water remaining in the middle.

The clarified wastewater is then removed from the second chamber via an outlet pipe, which transports the water into the septic drain field, also known as a seepage field or leach field. The remaining scum and solids in the tank are broken down by naturally occurring bacteria and what is left is pumped periodically.



## Emptying septic tanks

The sludge that remains at the bottom of the tank following the natural biological separation process must be periodically removed from the tank by a vacuum truck, to avoid it overflowing into the leach field. How often this happens depends on a range of factors, from the size of the tank, the amount of waste that is added to the tank, and a host of other variables. Some need emptying every couple of years, while others can go for decades before needing to be emptied.

## Septic tank maintenance advice

Even though septic systems require relatively little maintenance, certain considerations need to be kept in mind by septic tank owners. For example, the following items should never be flushed down the drain or toilet:

### The “Dirty Dozen”

Food waste, Fat, oil and grease (FOG), Plastic bags, Nappies, Sanitary towels, including tampons, applicators and wrappers, Cotton buds, Condoms, Bandages and plasters, Baby wipes, Medicines, needles and syringes\*, Cleaning wipes, Razor blades

\*These should be taken to your local pharmacy or health authority for safe disposal.

Not only can these items block the inlet and outlet pipes, they can also disrupt the biological separation process taking place within the tank itself.

## Septic drain field treatment

Septic drain or leach fields do not usually require a lot of maintenance, but there are certain things septic tank owners should do to make sure it remains well protected and operational. They include; Avoiding planting trees or plants on the area, as their roots can damage the underground pipes. Avoiding driving over the field and avoiding covering the field in concrete.