SEPTICS — GUIDE

Signs of septic failure and what to do next

Recognize warning signs, limit exposure and give a service company useful information.

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Sewage backing up indoors, wastewater on the ground, wet areas near the drain field and sewage odours need attention. EPA lists backups, standing water, damp spots and unusually lush vegetation among possible signs of a failing system. These signs call for investigation. They do not identify a single cause. [US EPA, Frequent Questions on Septic Systems, accessed 2026-11-10.]

Keep people away from wastewater

Avoid contact with sewage and keep children and pets away from affected areas. Do not open a tank or enter it. Leave lids secure. Contact a septic professional and the local health or environmental office if sewage is surfacing or you cannot safely use the system.

Describe what happened and where. Say whether the problem is inside the house, over the tank or near the field. Mention recent rain, unusual water use and alarms. Do not reset or silence equipment repeatedly without following the system instructions.

Collect useful information

Find the plan and last service report. Note when the symptoms began, which fixtures are affected and whether they recur after water use. Photos from a safe location can help the company understand the report. Do not walk into wastewater to take them.

A slow fixture can have a plumbing cause. A green patch can have other causes. Ask the professional to distinguish a building drain blockage, tank problem, pump fault and dispersal problem instead of assuming the tank only needs pumping.

Ask what a pump-out will achieve

Pumping removes tank contents. It does not show that a saturated or damaged drain field is repaired. Ask for findings, limits and a written next step. If the provider proposes excavation, ask how the diagnosis supports the work and which authority needs to approve it.

Avoid a quick chemical fix

EPA does not recommend septic additives as a routine cure. Its guidance warns that additives can be ineffective or harmful. Use the manufacturer's and local authority's instructions for the actual system, and keep service reports after the immediate problem is addressed.

Sources

All sources below were fetched and checked on 2026-11-10. That is the access date, not a claim about publication date.

- US EPA: Frequent Questions on Septic Systems, accessed 2026-11-10.
- Washington State Department of Health: Septic Systems, accessed 2026-11-10.

Frequently asked questions

Will pumping cure a failing drain field?

A pump-out does not establish the cause or repair the field. Ask for an assessment of the full system.