

Septic systems have been used for many years in areas not served by public sewers. However, not all soil and site conditions are well suited for conventional gravity systems. To protect public health and water quality, alternative systems are often used in areas where conventional systems cannot assure safe sewage treatment.

The mound system is one alternative system that provides:

- Dosing and resting cycles.
- Uniform distribution of effluent (liquid leaving tank).
- Known level of sewage treatment in the sand fill before disposal.
- Greater distance for effluent to travel before reaching groundwater.

The following information will help you understand your mound system and keep it operating safely at the lowest possible cost.

A typical mound system has three working parts:

1. The septic tank.
2. The pump chamber and pump.
3. The mound and its replacement area.

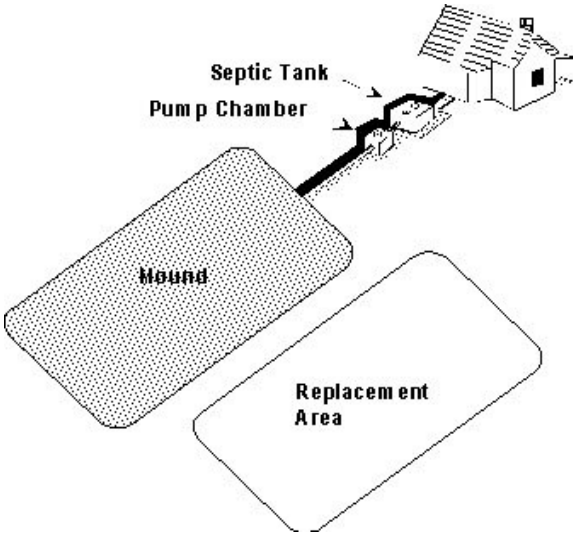


Image: Diagram of basic mound system

The Septic Tank

The typical septic tank is a large buried container made of concrete, fiberglass or polyethylene. Wastewater from your home flows into the tank. Heavy solids settle to the bottom where bacterial action partially decomposes them. Most of the lighter solids, such as grease and oils, rise to the top and form a scum layer.

The wastewater leaving the septic tank is a liquid called effluent. It has been partially treated but still contains disease-causing bacteria and other pollutants. The effluent flows from the tank to the pump chamber by gravity.

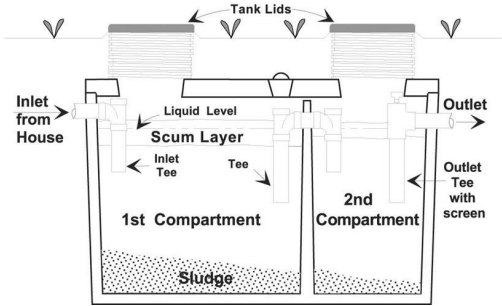


Image: Inside the septic tank.

Properly Caring For Your Septic Tank:

1. **Inspect your septic tank once every year and pump it when needed.** If the tank is not pumped periodically, solids will mound to a height where they can escape from the septic tank. This will clog the pump and mound. Using garbage disposals increases the amount of solids entering the tank and require more frequent pumping.
2. **Do not flush harmful material into the septic tank.** Never allow materials such as grease, newspapers, paper towels, cigarettes butts, coffee grounds, diapers, sanitary napkins, solvents, oils, paint, or pesticides to enter the system. For information on the proper disposal of hazardous household waste, call the Washington Recycle Hotline at 1-800-RECYCLE.
3. **Avoid using chemical or biological septic tank additives.** Additives are not necessary for the proper functioning of a septic tank, nor do they reduce the need for routine tank pumping. In fact, they can harm your system.

The Pump Chamber

The pump chamber is a concrete, fiberglass, or polyethylene container that collects the septic tank effluent. The chamber contains a pump, pump control floats, and a high-water alarm float. The pump action can be controlled either by the use of control floats or by timer controls. Control floats are set to turn the pump “ON” and “OFF” at levels for pumping a specific volume of effluent per dose. Timer controls are set to produce both the length of the dose and the interval or rest period between doses.

The high water alarm float starts an alarm to warn you of any pump malfunction. If pump timer controls are used, the alarm also will warn you of excessive water use in the home. The float is set to start when the effluent in the pump chamber rises above the “ON” float. The alarm should consist of a buzzer and an easily visible light. It should be on an electrical circuit separate from the pump.

The pump discharge pipe should have a union and valve for easy removal of the pump. A piece of nylon rope or other non-corrosive material should be attached to the pump for taking the pump in and out of the chamber.

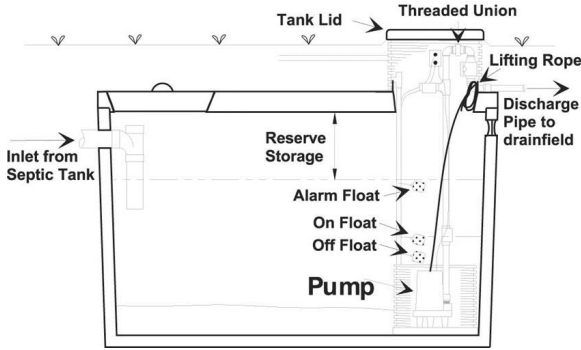


Image: Diagram of the pump chamber.

To Properly Care for Your Pump System:

1. **Check the pump chamber, pump, and floats every year. Replace or repair worn or broken parts.** Pump maintenance should follow the manufacturer’s recommendations. Check electrical parts and conduits for corrosion. If the alarm panel has a “push-to-test” button, it should be checked regularly.
2. **Install a septic tank effluent filter or pump screen if your system does not have one.** Screening or filtering the septic tank effluent provides an effective way of preventing solids from clogging the pump

and pipes. Inspecting a screen or filter, and cleaning it when necessary, is quick and easy and prevents costly damage from solids entering the mound system.

3. **Protect the mound from overloading after a prolonged power outage or pump failure.** Effluent will continue to collect in the chamber until the pump starts. The pump may dose a volume more than the mound can handle if there is too much effluent in the chamber. Once the reserve storage inside the pump chamber is all used up, the plumbing in your home can backup. When the pump is off for more than 6 hours, the following measures can be taken to help protect the mound (timer controls will automatically correct this problem):
 - a. Reduce your water use to a minimum.
 - b. Turn off the pump at the control panel.
 - c. After power is restored or pump service is completed, switch the pump on and let it run for 5 minutes maximum, then turn it off again. Repeat this manual switching every 6 hours until the effluent drops to the “OFF” float level and the pump turns off automatically. If there is little water use during the outage or pump service, the pump may automatically turn off during the first manual switching.

The Mound

The mound is a drainfield that is raised above the natural soil surface in a specific sand-fill material. Within the sand fill is a gravel-filled bed with a network of small diameter pipes. Septic tank effluent is pumped through the pipes in controlled doses to ensure uniform distribution throughout the bed. The effluent leaves the pipes under low pressure through small diameter holes and trickles downward through the gravel and into the sand. The effluent is treated as it moves through the sand and into the natural soil.

Every new mound is required to have a designated replacement area. It must be protected should the existing system need an addition or repair.

To Properly Care for the Mound:

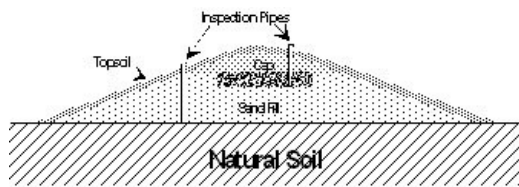


Image: Diagram of a mound.

1. **Know where your system and replacement area are located and protect them.** Before you plant a garden, construct a building, or install a pool, check on the location of your system and replacement area.
2. **Practice water conservation and balance your water use throughout the week to keep from overloading the system.** The more wastewater you produce, the more wastewater the mound must treat and dispose.
3. **Divert water from surfaces such as roofs, driveways, or patios away from the mound and replacement area.** The entire mound is graded to provide for runoff. Place structures, ditches, and driveways far enough away so that water movement from the mound is not disrupted.
4. **Keep traffic such as vehicles, heavy equipment, or livestock off your mound and replacement area.** The pressure can compact the soil or damage pipes.
5. **Landscape your mound properly.** Do not place impermeable materials over your mound or replacement area. Materials such as concrete or plastic reduce evaporation and the supply of air to the soil needed for proper effluent treatment. Grass is the best cover for the mound.
6. **Inspect the mound and downslope areas for odors, wet spots, or surfacing sewage on a regular basis.** You should also check your system’s inspection pipes to see if there is a liquid level continually over 6 inches. This may be an early indication of a problem. Call your local health agency for assistance.

What If the Alarm Comes On?

An alarm float will trigger an alarm light and buzzer to come on if the effluent level inside the pump chamber gets too high. This could be caused by a faulty pump, float, or circuit, excessive water use, or other reasons. By conserving water (avoiding baths, showers, and clothes washing during this time), the reserve storage in the pump chamber should allow you enough time to get the problem corrected. Push the reset light on the alarm panel to silence the alarm. Before calling for service or repair, check to see if the problem could be:

1. **A tripped circuit breaker or blown fuse.** The pump should have a separate circuit with its own breaker or fuse. If it’s on a circuit with other equipment, that equipment can cause the breaker to trip.
2. **An unplugged power cord to the pump or float switch.** If electrical connections are the plug-in type, be sure switch and pump plugs are making good contact in the outlet.
3. **Control floats are tangled by other parts in the chamber, such as the electric power cord, lifting rope, or pump screen.** Be sure floats operate freely in the chamber.
4. **Debris on floats or support cable that is causing the pump to switch off.** Lift the floats out of the chamber and clean.

Do not enter the pump chamber. Gases inside pump chambers are poisonous and the lack of oxygen can be fatal. If the problem cannot be located with the steps above, call your pump service person or on-site system provider for service or repair. The service or repair of pumps and other electrical equipment must be done by a licensed professional.

CAUTION: Always turn off the power supply at the circuit breaker and unplug all power cords before handling the pump or floats.

Additional Information

For more information about caring for your septic system and to learn more about different system types, please visit: www.doh.wa.gov/septic

On-Site Sewage System Regulations (Chapter 246-272A WAC)
<https://doh.wa.gov/wastewater-rules-and-regulations>

Water Conservation and Droughts
<https://doh.wa.gov/community-and-enviornment/drinking-water-emergencies/drought>

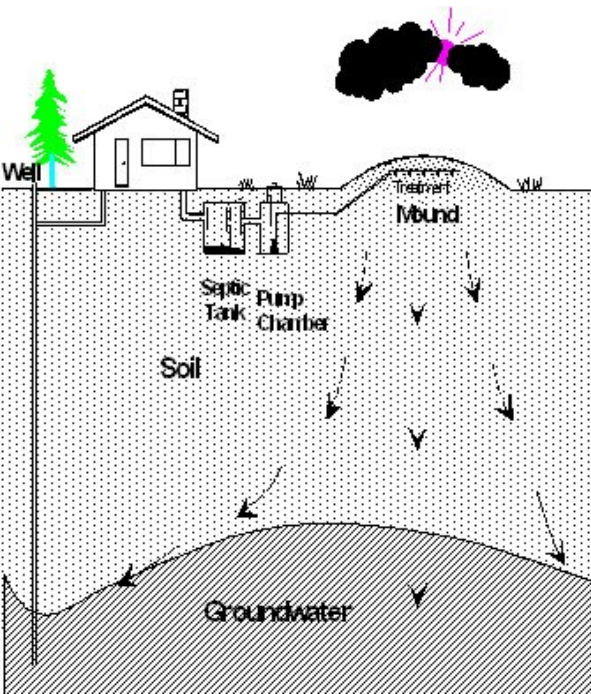
Publications on the Department of Health’s webpages are available by writing to:

Washington State Department of Health
Wastewater Management Section
PO Box 47824
Olympia, WA 98504-7824

Other sources of information include your:
Local Health Agency
Soil Conservation Service Office
Cooperative Extension Office

DOH 337-088 (January 2025)
To request this document in another format, call 1-800-525-0127. Deaf or hard of hearing customers, please call 711 (Washington Relay) or email doh.information@doh.wa.gov.

Understanding And Caring for Your Mound System



WASHINGTON STATE
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE

