

Getting to know your sewage treatment system

Most properties are connected to the public sewer. Some aren't, and in these cases you're likely to have a septic tank, a package sewage treatment plant or cesspit. Whatever type of private sewage treatment system you have, each is designed to take the dirty water and sewage from your house and then treat it before it's returned to the environment.

We've put together some handy hints to help you get to know your system that little bit better...

1. Septic tank

Your septic tank is usually made up of two 'chambers' and buried underground. They can be brick built, or made from fiberglass or plastic.

The 'tank' holds the sewage – the solids either fall to the bottom or float to the top and the liquid drains through a pipe into a drainage field or soakaway. This drainage is really important as it removes any remaining pollutants before the liquid reaches groundwater.

Septic tanks generally need emptying every 12 months.

2. Package sewage treatment plant

Package sewage treatment plants are more sophisticated than septic tanks – they're more like mini versions of the sewage treatment works owned by water companies and dotted around the country.

Most of these plants need an electrical supply, and you can often see a larger cover above ground. The sewage is biologically treated within the plant – this process allows bacteria to grow. This bacteria then breaks down the sewage, resulting in a treated effluent that can be released straight into a watercourse (subject to certain conditions).

Just like a septic tank, package sewage treatment plants need to be regularly emptied, and also serviced.

3. Cesspit

These are the simplest, although most expensive, of all the systems – it's just an underground holding tank that needs to be emptied more frequently.

On average, cesspits need emptying every 6-12 months.

What you need to know about your system!

- > Make you know which of these you have – a septic tank, package sewage treatment plant or cesspit
- > Make sure you know where it is
- > Check if you share it with neighbours
- > Find out where the treated liquid goes
- > Check if there are any potential risks to nearby watercourses, boreholes or springs used for drinking water

It's worth finding a specialist Environment Agency registered contractor or company that deals with the maintenance of treatment plants and septic tanks. You'll be able to find local professionals online or in the Yellow Pages.

