

Why should you look after your sewage treatment system?

Septic tanks. Cesspits. Package sewage treatment plants. Whatever kind of off mains sewage system you have, when it works, they're great. But like anything else, if you don't look after something, it'll fail. It could start to smell, spread disease, pollute local rivers and seas... and nobody wants that.

You have a legal and social responsibility to keep your system in good working order. In January 2015, additional rules came into effect. These set out the conditions and technical requirements specified by the Environment Agency that your system needs to meet in order to be used without an environmental permit to discharge treated sewage.

Savings galore

Good news! If you look after your system, it will need emptying less often so you save money. Regular maintenance costs around £100 to £250 per year. If you don't do this, the cost of repairing or replacing a malfunctioning system or a failed drainage field rockets to anything between £5,000 and £10,000.

Property matters

If you let your system get into an unusable condition, it could easily lower the value of your property. You might not be thinking of moving house next week, but it's still worth keeping on top of it.

Bye bye bacteria

Household wastewater is brimming over with bacteria and viruses, as well as nitrogen and phosphorus. If your system is working well, it will have no problem reducing these pollutants.

If not, you could be churning out untreated sewage, which causes surface water and groundwater contamination. This poses dangers to drinking water – spreading disease in humans and animals – as well as damaging the environment. You could be releasing these bacteria, viruses and toxic chemicals to local streams, rivers, lakes and seas. These could harm people, increasing the chances of infectious diseases such as eye and ear infections, acute gastrointestinal illness and hepatitis. They're also harmful to local wildlife, with pollutants killing native plants, fish, and shellfish.

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.

