



SC DEPARTMENT of
**ENVIRONMENTAL
SERVICES**

HOMEOWNER SEPTIC SYSTEM SERIES:

Chemotherapy and Your Septic System

*How cancer treatment can affect
your septic system — and how to protect it.*



WHY CHEMO IS HARD ON YOUR SEPTIC SYSTEM

Chemotherapy (“chemo”) drugs are very potent, and a portion of these medications can pass through the body and enter the septic system through urine, feces, vomit, and sweat. Because chemo drugs can be toxic to living cells, they can damage the beneficial bacteria that both your septic tank and your drainfield rely on to treat wastewater. Left unmanaged, there are increased risks of toilet and drain backups in the home and even drainfield failure with wastewater surfacing in the yard. Also, since some drugs can remain active for months or years, a damaged or failing septic system could be a hazard to groundwater and nearby wells.

FREE PUMPING MAY BE AVAILABLE

Pumps for Patients, a national nonprofit, coordinates free septic pumping for people undergoing chemotherapy through a network of licensed providers. Learn more or apply at pumpsforpatients.org.

If someone in your household, or someone you know, is receiving chemotherapy and their home is on a septic system, there are steps that can be taken to help protect the system.

BEST PRACTICES DURING CHEMOTHERAPY TREATMENT

- » **CONTACT A LICENSED PUMPER.** Let them know treatment has started so they can monitor the system and use proper protective equipment. Inform them that more frequent pump-outs will be needed. A GIS map of licensed pumpers can be found at des.sc.gov.
- » **PUMP MORE OFTEN.** Pumping frequency may need to vary depending on factors such as your specific treatment and overall household water usage but every 3 months is a general recommendation.
- » **FLUSH TWICE AND DILUTE.** Close the lid and flush twice to add extra water and lower the concentration of chemotherapy medications in the tank.
- » **AVOID FLUSHING HARSH PRODUCTS.** Bleach, antibacterial soaps, drain cleaners, and ammonia cleaners stress the beneficial bacteria further so use them sparingly.
- » **MIND THE FIRST 48–72 HOURS AFTER TREATMENT.** This is when the highest amounts of chemo drugs may pass through the body and when the septic system is most vulnerable. Make sure to also follow your care team’s instructions for handling body fluids in the days right after each dose.
- » **SKIP THE ADDITIVES.** None are proven to undo the effects of chemotherapy medications.
- » **AFTER TREATMENT.** Have the tank pumped and refilled with clean water to help the system restart.

WHERE TO GET HELP

Contact your local SC Department of Environmental Services office or visit des.sc.gov/septic.