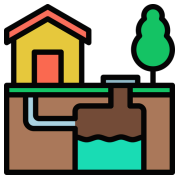

SC DEPARTMENT of ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES

HOMEOWNER SEPTIC SYSTEM SERIES:

Repairing a Failing Septic System

What to expect, who to call, and how repairs actually work

When a septic system stops working properly, the right repair depends on what's actually wrong. Some problems are simple and inexpensive; others mean replacing part of the system. This handout explains the common fixes, what they involve and why septic repairs are a job for licensed professionals rather than do-it-yourself work.

Get a diagnosis

Before any repair, a licensed septic professional should inspect the system to find the true cause. The same symptom — a backup, for example — can come from a simple clog or a failed drainfield, and the fixes are very different. Paying for a proper diagnosis first usually saves money overall.

Step 1: Pinpoint the problem

A professional inspection typically includes:

- Locating and uncovering the tank lids and inspecting the tank and baffles.
- Checking liquid levels in the tank to tell whether the problem is upstream (a clog) or downstream (the drainfield).
- Inspecting the distribution box and drainfield for saturation, settling or surfacing effluent.
- Reviewing your water use, recent rainfall and maintenance history.

Step 2: Match the repair to the cause

Below are the most common septic problems and the repairs that usually address them, from simplest to most involved.

- **Clogs and full tanks: *simple fix.*** If the tank is overdue for pumping or a pipe is clogged, pumping the tank and clearing the blockage may fully restore the system. This is routine and relatively low cost.
- **Damaged baffles or lids: *moderate repair.*** Broken inlet or outlet baffles or cracked lids let solids escape into the drainfield or allow leaks.
- **Failed distribution box or pipes: *moderate repair***. A distribution box spreads effluent evenly across the drainfield. If it settles, cracks, or clogs, effluent overloads one area. Re-leveling or replacing the box and damaged pipes restores even flow.
- **Failed or saturated drainfield: *significant repair.*** When soil in the drainfield can no longer absorb effluent — from age, overloading, compaction or root damage — it may need to be taken out of service and repaired or replaced with a new drainfield in a different location. Regular maintenance can help prevent this situation.

Common problems and typical repairs

Problem	Typical repair	Relative cost
Tank overdue for pumping/clog	Pump tank, clear blockage	Lower
Broken baffle	Replace component	Lower-moderate
Distribution box failure	Re-level or replace box	Moderate
Cracked or leaking tank	Repair or replace tank	Higher
Failed drainfield	Repair or replace drainfield	Highest

Why septic repairs aren't a DIY job

- **Health and safety:** septic tanks contain toxic gases that can be deadly, and untreated sewage carries disease.
- **Regulation:** repairs require the use of licensed contractors under state regulations.
- **Cost control:** a wrong guess can turn a small repair into a full drainfield replacement.

How to choose a contractor

- Confirm the contractor is licensed and, where required, permitted for septic work in your area.
- Ask for a written diagnosis and estimate before work begins.
- Get more than one quote for major repairs like drainfield replacement.
- Keep all paperwork (permits, invoices and reports) with your home records.

Protect your investment

Once your system is repaired, a simple maintenance routine — regular pumping, watching what goes down the drain and protecting the drainfield — keeps it working for decades. See the companion handouts on maintenance and drainfield care.

Additional help and resources

Contact your local SCDES office (des.sc.gov/localoffices) for help finding licensed installers and pumpers. Find additional information and resources at **des.sc.gov/septic**

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