



HOMEOWNER SEPTIC SYSTEM SERIES:

Is My Septic System Failing?

How to recognize the warning signs of a malfunctioning system

Your septic system quietly treats and disposes of the wastewater from your home. When it works, you hardly notice it. When it starts to fail, the warning signs are usually there well before a full backup happens. ***Catching problems early can save you thousands of dollars and protect your family's health, your drinking water and nearby streams and lakes.***



The bottom line

A failing septic system can release untreated sewage into your yard, your home or groundwater. If you notice any of the signs below, stop adding water to the system and call a licensed septic professional promptly.

Warning signs inside your home

- Slow drains in sinks, tubs and showers, especially in multiple fixtures at the same time.
- Gurgling sounds coming from drains, toilets or pipes.
- Toilets that are slow to flush or that back up repeatedly, even after plunging.
- Sewage odors indoors, often strongest near floor drains or in lowest level of the home.
- Sewage backing up into toilets, tubs or floor drains — this is an emergency and means you should stop using water immediately.

Warning signs in your yard

- Soggy, mushy, or unusually wet ground — or standing water — over or near the tank or drainfield, even when it hasn't rained.
- Bright, lush or fast-growing grass over the drainfield compared to the rest of the lawn.
- Foul or sewage-like odors outdoors around the tank or drainfield.
- Dark, greasy or smelly liquid surfacing in the yard — this is untreated effluent and a health hazard.

Warning signs in the environment

- Algae blooms, excessive weed growth or murky water in a nearby pond, lake or ditch.
- High levels of nitrates or bacteria in a well water test, which can signal effluent is reaching groundwater.
- Recurring problems after heavy rain, which may mean the drainfield is saturated and no longer absorbing water.



A note on well water

If you have a private well, test it at least once a year for bacteria and nitrates. A failing septic system nearby is one of the most common reasons home well water becomes unsafe to drink.

What warning signs usually mean

What you notice	Common cause
Slow drains and gurgling throughout the house	A full tank, clog or failing drainfield
Sewage backing up indoors	Blockage in the pipe or tank, or a saturated drainfield
Wet, smelly spots over the drainfield	Drainfield is overloaded or no longer absorbing
Lush grass over the drainfield	Effluent surfacing
Shrubs with spreading roots	Groundwater or runoff flooding the system

What to do if you notice warning signs

- Reduce water use immediately. Avoid washing laundry, dishwashing and long showers.
- Keep people and pets away from any pooled water or wet spots.
- Don't flush chemicals or "tank treatment" products hoping for a fix; they rarely help.
- Locate your records: the tank location, size and date of the last pump-out.
- Call a licensed septic contractor or pumper to inspect and diagnose the system.



Identify an emergency

Sewage backing up into a home or pooling sewage in a yard where children or pets play is a public health emergency. Stop using water and contact a professional as soon as possible.

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