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ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH FACT SHEET NO. 504

MAINTAINING AN ON-SITE WASTEWATER SYSTEM

An on-site waste water system typically comprises a septic tank with an associated effluent disposal area (e.g. absorption trenches or evapotranspiration bed).

To ensure the most efficient operation of a septic tank, the system must be installed in accordance with the Northern Territory *Code of Practice for Small On-site Sewage and Sullage Treatment Systems and the Disposal or Reuse of Sewage Effluent*. This includes any alterations or changes to an existing system.

The following tips will help you to save money, reduce pollution and conserve resources:

REMOVE ACCUMULATED SLUDGE FROM THE TANK

- Generally, septic tanks require periodic cleaning or pumping out of accumulated solids at least every 3 to 4 years. If solids are allowed to build up in the tank to a point where they pass to the effluent treatment stage they can cause problems. Household pipes may become filled with sewage and the subsoil soil trench system could soon become clogged with solids. This may cause the effluent to come to the surface, pool and cause unpleasant smells. This can constitute a risk to public health, particularly to children playing in the vicinity. Poorly maintained irrigation systems used in aerobic wastewater treatment systems can also present similar problems with surface effluent.

MINIMISE OR MANAGE THE VOLUME OF WATER ENTERING THE SYSTEM TO IMPROVE THE LIFESPAN AND OPERATION OF THE EFFLUENT DISPOSAL AREA

- Regularly check plumbing fixtures for leaking taps or toilets cisterns. Have them repaired. Ensure water from roof downpipes does not enter the system and roof water is diverted away from the effluent disposal area.
- Install water saving devices such as shower heads that minimise water use and dual flush toilet cisterns. If the terrain slopes down to your effluent disposal area, ensure that surface water is diverted around this area by installing a stormwater diversion trench.
- Spread large washing loads over several days to minimise the impact on your septic tank system. Plan your water usage so that large flows to the system in a short time are avoided, e.g. operate the dishwasher and washing machine at separate times.

ENSURE THE SYSTEM CAN BE READILY ACCESSED FOR MAINTENANCE

- Do not construct driveways, buildings or paved areas over the septic and soakage system as this may result in damage to the system and access problems when the tank requires pumping out at a later date.

USE HOUSEHOLD DETERGENTS AND BLEACHES SENSIBLY

- The normal use of household detergents and bleaches is considered satisfactory. If you have an aerobic wastewater treatment system follow the manufacturer instructions for these systems. If in doubt about any household product suitability, consult the product manufacturer.

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DON'T USE THE SEPTIC TANK FOR THE DISPOSAL OF CHEMICALS

- Don't dispose of medicines or strong chemicals such as pesticides and paints into the septic tank. This can cause the septic tank to malfunction and may pollute groundwater.

PROTECT THE SEPTIC TANK AND EFFLUENT DISPOSAL AREA FROM DAMAGE

- If the septic tank and disposal area are exposed to vehicle traffic, use barriers or other means to prevent vehicles driving over these areas as this could cause damage and result in costly repairs. Care must be taken when slashing around septic tanks and effluent disposal areas so to prevent damage to access lids and inspection openings.

MAINTAIN THE EFFLUENT DISPOSAL AREA

- Ensure that the effluent disposal area is planted with grass to maximise evapotranspiration. Grass needs to be mowed on a regular basis.
- Small shrubs and shallow rooted trees (e.g. banana trees) may be planted between or around the absorption trenches but care must be taken to prevent the trenches from being shaded.

PREVENT MOSQUITO BREEDING

- Ensure that all vents associated with the system are fitted with mosquito proof mesh and access openings and inspection openings on the septic tank and absorption trenches are correctly sealed.

After a number of years of use, some effluent disposal areas may fail and require replacement. The first signs of this can be soggy patches on the surface in the area where the absorption trenches are located. This can be accompanied by strong odours and blocked pipes. This can constitute a health risk and advice should be sought from a licensed plumber to confirm the cause.

If the absorption trench requires replacement or the system needs to be altered in any way, then seek advice from a licensed plumber. A malfunctioning effluent disposal system can constitute a risk to public health and in some cases result in action being taken by the local office of Department of Health – Environmental Health.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
CONTACT ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH ON 1800 095 646 OR YOUR LOCAL OFFICE

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