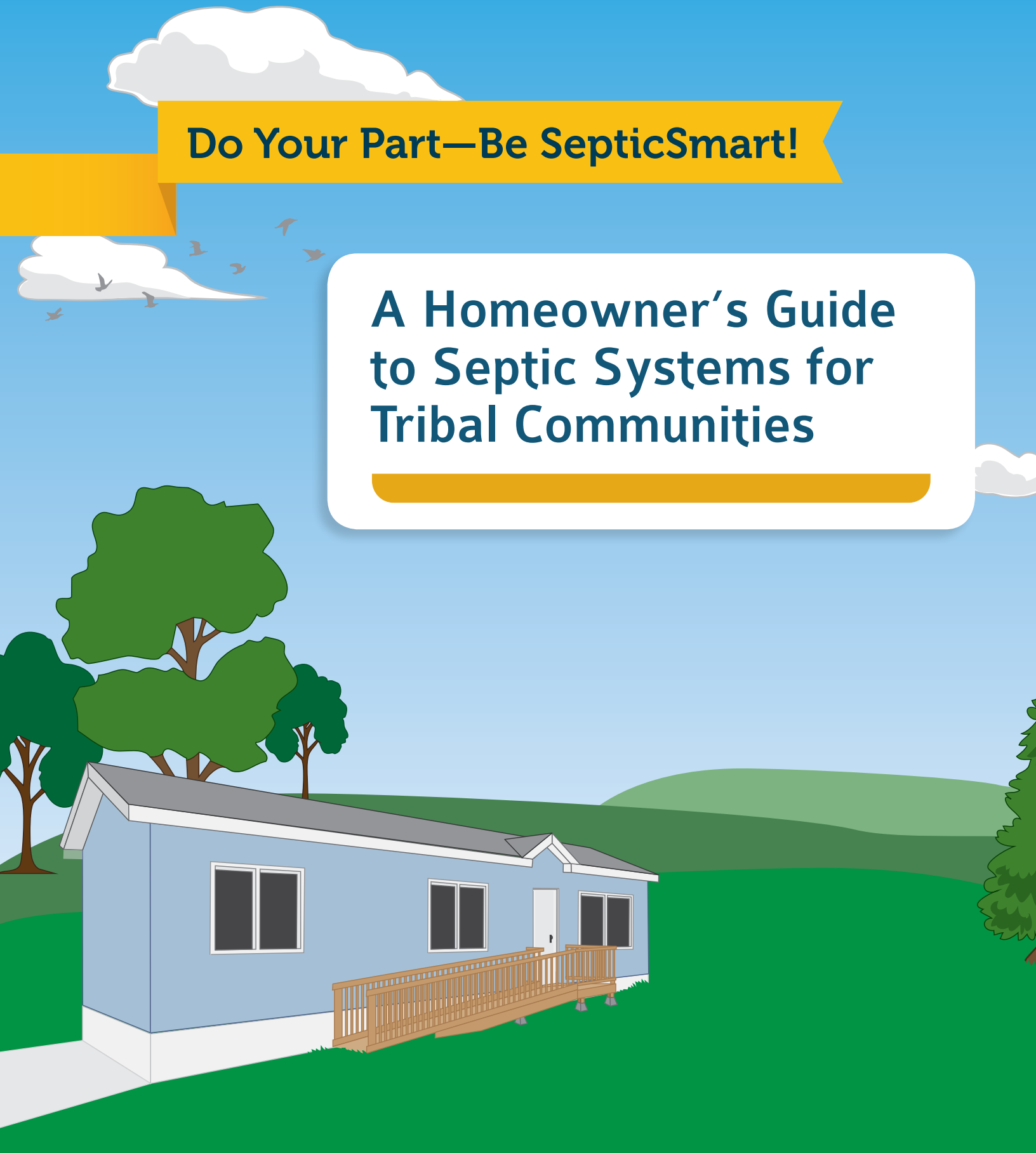


Do Your Part—Be SepticSmart!

A Homeowner's Guide to Septic Systems for Tribal Communities



This guide is designed to help homeowners understand, operate, and maintain their septic systems to protect community health and the environment. It provides information tailored to the unique needs and circumstances of American Indian and Alaska Native individuals and families, with the goal of supporting safe and reliable wastewater treatment. To learn more about septic systems, please visit www.epa.gov/septic.



Good for Your Health. Good for The Environment. Good for Your Wallet.

Your septic system provides a vital service for you and your family. It treats the wastewater from your home and keeps you and your neighbors healthy. When your septic system is maintained correctly, it can protect the environment and save you money in the long run.

Septic System Basics

What Is a Septic System?

A septic system is a method for treating household wastewater. It consists of a septic tank and a drainfield. The system collects and treats wastewater from toilets, showers, kitchen drains, and laundry.

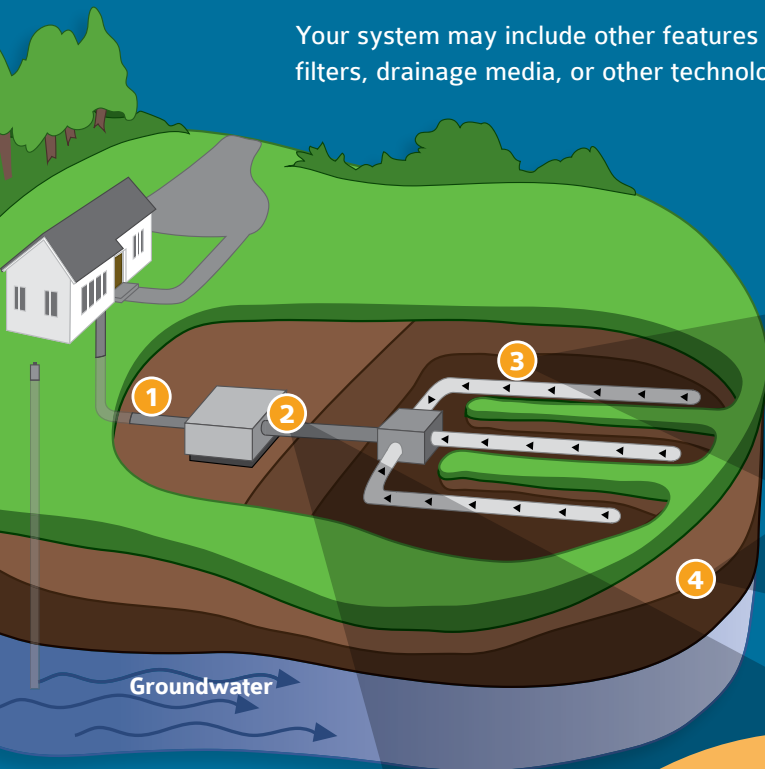
Septic systems are used throughout the U.S., but most often in locations where it is not affordable or practical to extend centralized sewer lines a long distance. Septic systems are common in more rural or remote locations.



How Does a Septic System Work?

- 1 All the wastewater from your home exits through one main drainage pipe and into the septic tank.
- 2 The **septic tank** is typically buried underground. It is designed to hold the wastewater long enough to allow solids to settle down to the bottom of the tank (sludge) and let oil and grease float to the top of the liquid (scum). The septic tank has compartments and a T-shaped outlet to prevent sludge and scum from leaving the tank and flowing into the drainfield area.
- 3 The remaining wastewater (effluent) exits the tank and flows into the **drainfield**. The drainfield is a shallow, underground connection of pipes with small holes to allow for the slow release of wastewater. If the drainfield is clogged, failing, or overloaded with too much liquid, it can flood, causing sewage to appear on the ground or back up into toilets and sinks.
- 4 The wastewater gradually distributes throughout the drainfield and filters into the soil. The soil serves as a natural filter and treatment system for the wastewater, removing harmful bacteria, viruses, and excess nutrients.

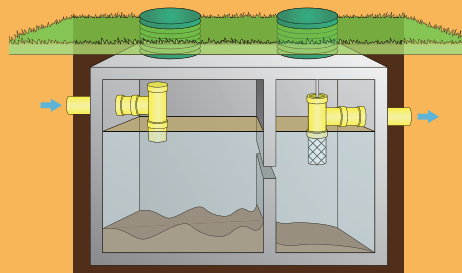
Your system may include other features to improve the treatment process, including pumps, filters, drainage media, or other technologies.



Drainfield

A drainfield (also called leach field) is an area where wastewater is distributed after it flows through a septic tank. The wastewater is treated and filtered as it drains through the soil.

Septic Tank



A septic tank is a buried tank that treats wastewater by removing solids and grease from the liquid that flows into the drainfield.

Do You Have a Septic System?

Here are some signs that your home is on a septic system:

- You use well water.
- Your neighbors have a septic system.
- Your yard has inspection ports or vent pipes sticking out of the ground.
- You are not located in or near a community with sewer service.
- You live in a rural area, far from other homes.

How You Can Find Your Septic System

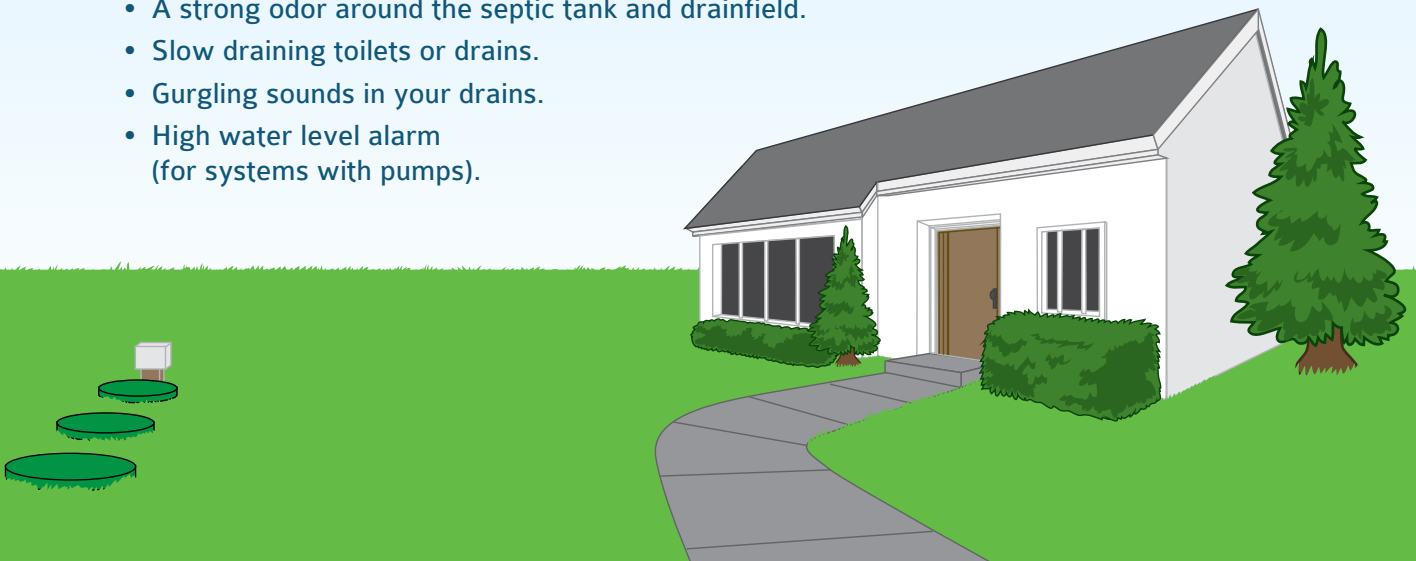
Once you've determined that you have a septic system, you can find it by:

- Looking on your home's "as-built" or record drawing.
- Asking your county or local health board if they have records of septic systems previously installed on the property, if you live off-territory or off-reservation.
- Checking your yard for lids and manhole covers.
- Contacting a septic inspector/pumper to help you locate it.
- Asking your water utility, if you are served by piped water.
- Asking the Indian Health Service (IHS) for records, if the site was previously served by an IHS program.
- Looking in your basement or crawlspace to see where 3" or 4" diameter piping leaves your home — this is typically the main waste line leading to the septic system. Follow the direction of this pipe outside and look in that area of your yard for signs of the system, such as a slight mound, access lids, or concrete or plastic risers at ground level.

Signs of Potential Problems

A strong smell isn't always the first sign of a malfunctioning septic system. Call a septic professional if you notice any of the following:

- Wastewater backing up into household drains.
- Bright green, spongy grass on the drainfield, especially during dry weather.
- Pooling water or muddy soil around your septic system or in your basement.
- Trees or strong-rooted plants growing directly out of the drainfield or septic tank area.
- A strong odor around the septic tank and drainfield.
- Slow draining toilets or drains.
- Gurgling sounds in your drains.
- High water level alarm (for systems with pumps).



Why Should You Maintain Your Septic System?

Keeps You and Your Neighbors Healthy

Improperly treated sewage from failing septic systems can contaminate groundwater, water used for agricultural irrigation, nearby surface waters, or the ground surface, which can spread disease in humans and animals. People who swim in wastewater-contaminated waters have a significantly higher chance of contracting a variety of infectious diseases, from eye and ear infections to serious stomach illness and hepatitis.

Proper use and maintenance can help prevent the septic system from backing up into your home, protecting you and your family's health. Back-ups can also lead to costly clean-ups.

Protects the Environment

Every time we use water at home—whether flushing a toilet, doing laundry, or washing dishes—that water has to go somewhere. In many communities, it flows into a septic system. If these systems are not properly maintained, they can create serious risks for the environment, such as releasing bacteria, viruses, and toxic chemicals into local waterways. When these pollutants are released into the ground without proper treatment, they eventually enter streams, rivers, and lakes, harming local ecosystems by killing native plants, fish, and shellfish.

Saves You Money

Properly maintaining your septic system lengthens its usable life. The cost of maintaining a system is far less expensive than replacing it, which can cost thousands of dollars. The most important maintenance task is regular pumping. How often your system needs to be pumped depends on household size and system type—larger households generate more wastewater and require more frequent service. Check the “Maintain Your Septic Tank” section of this guide for recommended pumping intervals. Keep in mind that pumping costs can vary based on your location and the distance to the nearest location that receives and manages septage.

Beware of Septic Tank Additives!

Some makers of septic tank additives claim their products break down septic tank sludge and eliminate the need for pumping. The use of these additives is not recommended because there is already bacteria, enzymes, yeasts, fungi, and other microorganisms that break down the solids in a septic system. Additive products can be ineffective or even harm the system and the environment. Proper maintenance and pumping at regular intervals can ensure that septic systems work properly and provide many years of service.



Maintaining Your Septic System

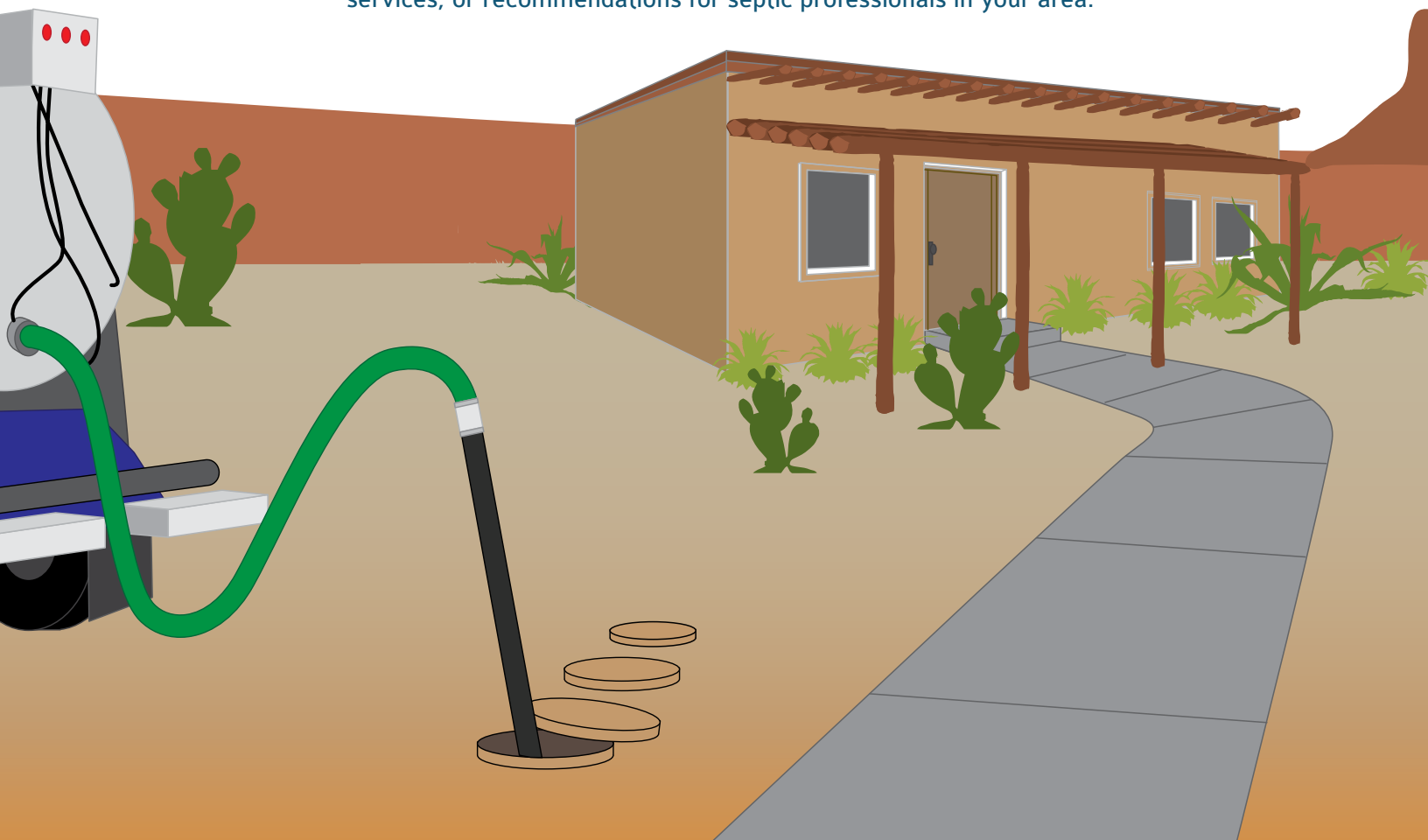
The Basics

Septic system maintenance isn't complicated, and it doesn't need to be expensive. Upkeep comes down to four important elements:

- Inspection and pumping
- Drainfield protection
- Use water efficiently
- Proper waste disposal

Inspection and Pumping

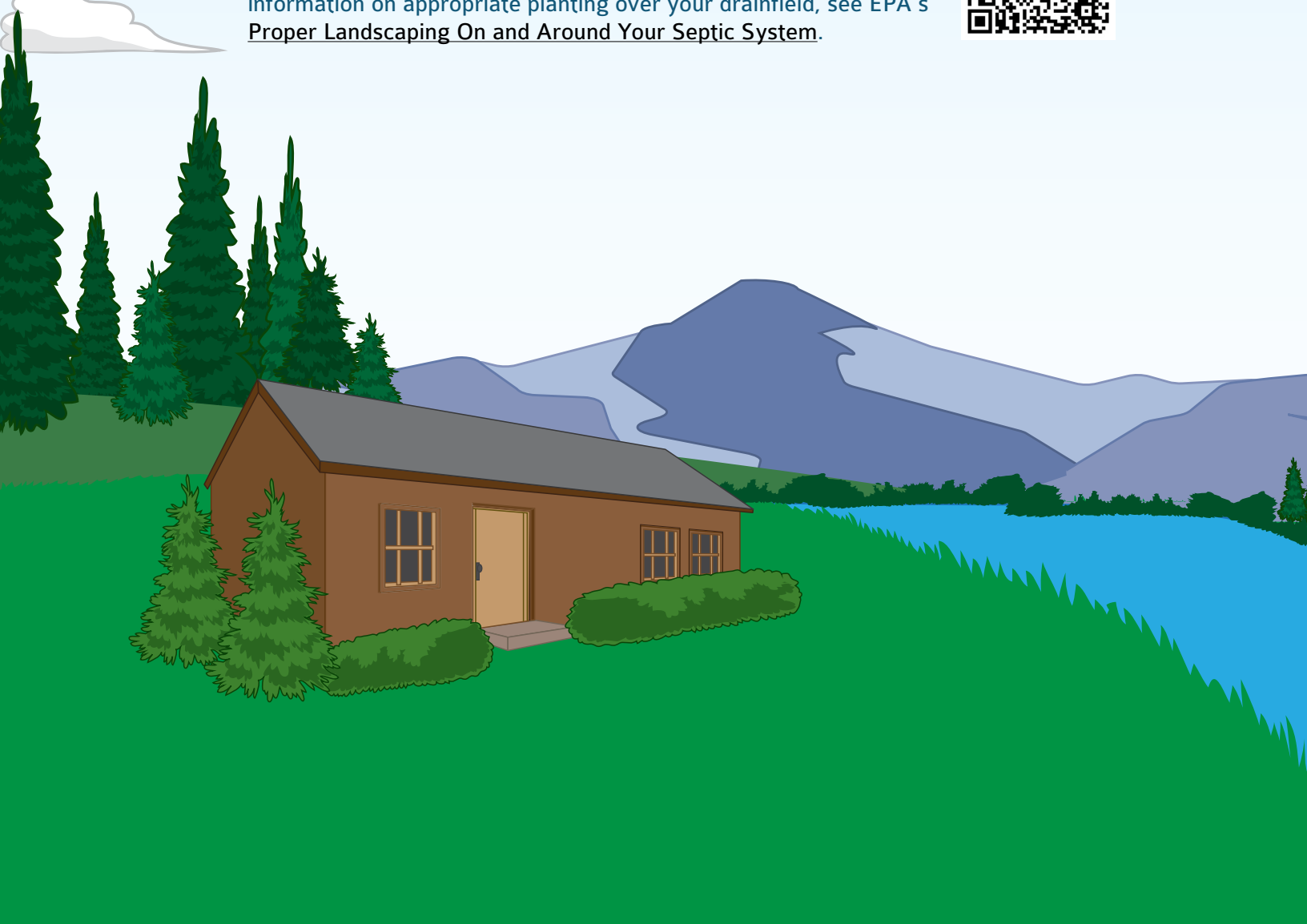
- For Tribal communities, IHS recommends that conventional systems should be pumped at least every three years.
 - If you have an effluent filter, it can be beneficial to inspect it every six months.
- Advanced treatment systems—which use additional processes like filtration, aeration, or disinfection to treat wastewater more thoroughly—should be pumped annually or as recommended by the manufacturer.
- Keep a record of your pumping history, permits, and other important documents related to your septic system.
- Contact your local Tribal official for programs that provide pumping or inspection services, or recommendations for septic professionals in your area.



Drainfield Protection

Your drainfield is an important part of your septic system. Here are a few things you should do to maintain it:

- Never park or drive cars or equipment on your drainfield.
- Mark the corners of the drainfield to prevent others from accidentally driving over or disturbing the area.
- Keep roof drains, sump pumps, and other rainwater drainage systems away from your drainfield area, as too much water slows down or stops the wastewater treatment process.
- Keep livestock and large animals off of your drainfield, and ensure pets do not dig or damage the area.
- Do not build or place any structures, such as sheds, on top of the drainfield.
- Do not plant trees or edible plants on or within 20-30 feet of the drainfield to keep roots from growing into your septic system. A septic service professional can advise you of the proper distance, depending on your landscape and type of septic system. For more information on appropriate planting over your drainfield, see EPA's [Proper Landscaping On and Around Your Septic System](#).



Use Water Efficiently

The less water a household uses, the less water enters the septic system. Efficient water use protects the operation of a septic system and reduces the risk of it failing.

- A single leaking toilet can waste hundreds of gallons of water per day and tax your septic system. Try to fix running toilets, dripping faucets, or leaking plumbing as soon as possible.
- When possible, opt for water fixtures and appliances that use less water.
- Spread out laundry loads throughout the week. While it might be tempting to do all your household laundry in a single day, this can overwhelm your septic system. Spacing out loads over several days gives your septic tank time to properly treat wastewater and helps prevent your drainfield from flooding.
- Water softeners and other freshwater purification systems may overload your septic tank with salt water, which can disrupt the settling of solids and release them into your drainfield. Ensure that connecting a purification system is compatible with your septic system.

Proper Waste Disposal

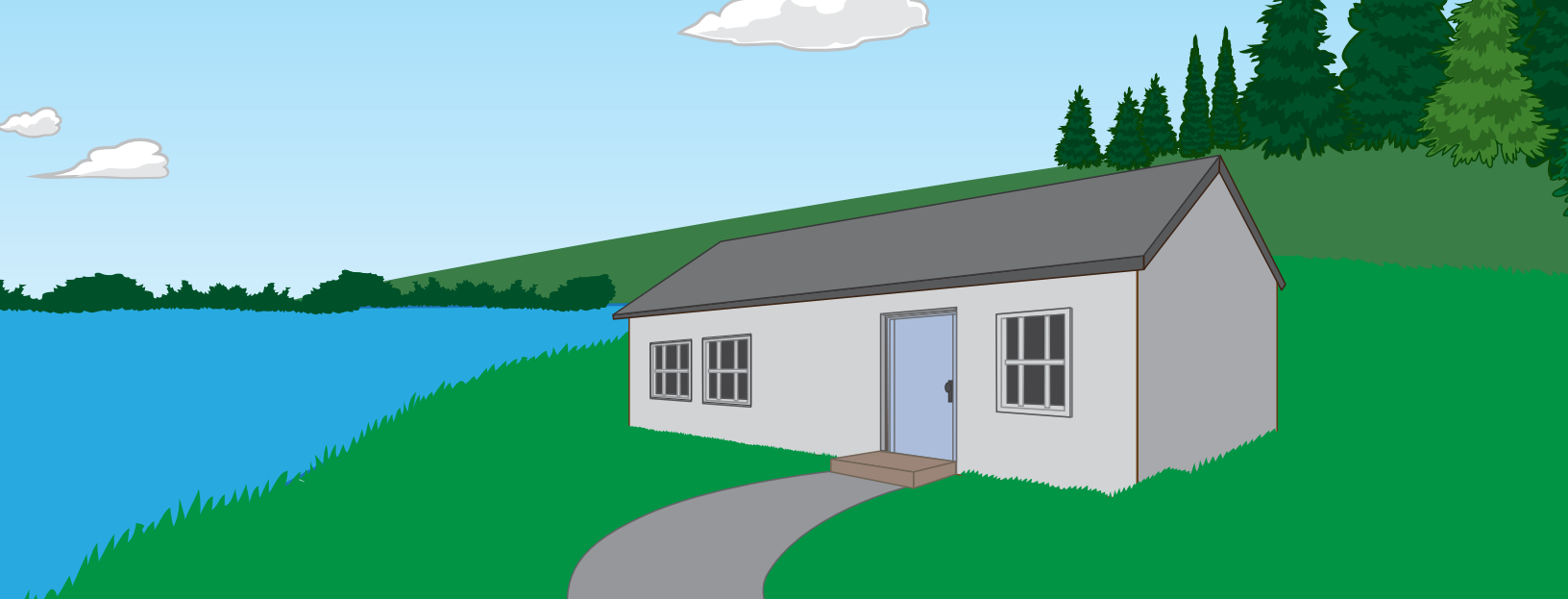
Only flush human waste and toilet paper, not wipes or other non-flushable items that should be disposed of in the trash. Flushing anything other than toilet paper can damage your internal plumbing and septic system.

Never flush:

- Feminine hygiene products
- Condoms
- Dental floss
- Diapers
- Cigarette butts
- Coffee grounds
- Cat litter
- Household chemicals like gasoline, oil, pesticides, antifreeze, and paint
- Medications and other personal care products
- Needles

For a complete list of septic system maintenance tips, visit www.epa.gov/septic/how-care-your-septic-system.





Take Care at the Drain

Everything you put down the toilet, kitchen sink, and shower drain will impact your septic system.

Your septic system contains a collection of living organisms that digest and treat household waste. Pouring harsh chemicals down your drain can kill these organisms and harm your septic system. Whether you're at the kitchen sink, bathtub, or utility sink:

- Avoid chemical drain openers for a clogged drain. Instead, use warm water and dish soap or a drain snake.
- Never pour cooking oil or grease down the drain. Instead, pour oil and grease into a disposal container to allow it to cool, and then throw it away in the garbage.
- Never pour oil-based paints, solvents, or large volumes of toxic cleaners down the drain. Minimize household paint waste. Check to see if your local solid waste transfer station accepts household hazardous waste or if your Tribe has a household hazardous waste collection event.
- Minimize the amount of hair flowing down the drain. Install drain covers, disposable hair catchers, tub stoppers with strainers, or other tools to catch hair before it goes down the drain.
- Eliminate or limit the use of a garbage disposal. Mesh strainers or catchers for the sink drain are cost-effective alternatives.

Pay attention to your system and its surroundings. One call to a septic professional could save you thousands of dollars, protect you and your family's health, and prevent harm to the environment!



For videos and more information on how you can be SepticSmart, please visit:

<https://www.epa.gov/septic/septicsmart-education-materials>

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KEEPING RECORDS



Inspect and Pump Frequently

IHS recommends that the average household septic system should be inspected **at least every six months**. Household septic tanks are typically pumped every three years. Alternative systems with electrical float switches, pumps, or mechanical components should be inspected more often. A service contract is important since alternative systems have mechanized parts.

Four major factors influence the frequency of septic pumping:

- 1 Household size
- 2 Total wastewater generated
- 3 Volume of solids in wastewater
- 4 Septic tank size

Keeping Records

Below record the last time you serviced your septic system and use the space to keep any notes or questions in case of an incident.

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