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Septic System Troubleshooting Guide for Homeowners

Problem	Risks	Potential Causes	Potential Remedies
Sewage backs up into house and/or plumbing fixtures don't drain or are sluggish	Human contact with sewage is a serious public health risk. Many waterborne diseases exist in household sewage. AVOID CONTACT.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excess water entering system • Improper plumbing • Blockage in plumbing • Improper operation • Pump failure • Improper system design • Roots clogging pipes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fix leaks • Install water-saving fixtures • Stop using garbage disposal • Clean septic tank and check pumps • Replace broken or cracked pipes and remove roots • Seal pipe connections • Avoid willow trees near system
Sewage surfacing in yard	Human contact with sewage is a serious public health risk. Many water-borne diseases exist in household sewage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excess water use • System blockages • Improper system elevations • Undersized soil treatment system • Pump failure or improper operation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fix leaks • Install water-saving fixtures • Clean septic tank and check pumps • Consult professionals • Fence off area until problem is fixed
Sewage odors — indoors	Toxic gases can cause discomfort and illness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sewage surfacing in yard • Improper plumbing • Sewage backup in house • Unsealed ejector sump pump • Roof vent pipe frozen closed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repair plumbing • Clean septic tank and check pumps • Replace water in drain traps
Sewage odors — outdoors	Major nuisance, but no serious health risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Source other than owner's system • Sewage surfacing in yard • Inspection pipe caps damaged or removed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clean tank and check pumps • Replace damaged caps • Repair or replace drainfield
Contaminated drinking or surface waters	The above public health risks are magnified by possible ingestion of contaminated water. Drinking contaminated water can cause health problems such as dysentery, hepatitis, and, for infants, methemoglobinemia.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System too close to well, water table, or fractured bedrock • Cesspool or drywell in use • Sewage discharges to surface or groundwater • Improper well construction • Broken water supply pipe • Source other than homeowner's system • Broken sewage lines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replace your well and/or septic system • Contact a local unit of government to investigate other potential sources

Problem	Risks	Potential Causes	Potential Remedies
Lift station alarm activated	Tank effluent may back up into the house.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pump failed • Fuse breaker tripped • Pump unplugged • Controls malfunctioning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check breaker and plugs • Check controls and pump • Make sure professional replaces pump with proper size unit
Distribution pipes and/or soil treatment system freezes in winter	The system may be inoperable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improper construction • Check valve in lift station not working • Foot or vehicle traffic over piping • Low flow rate • Lack of use • Undersized pump 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check construction • Examine check valve and/or replace it • Keep people and vehicles off area • Increase water use • Have someone use water in house if you are away • Increase frequency of pump cycling • Operate septic tank as a holding tank • Pump system in fall and use carefully over winter months • Don't use antifreeze
