

How rainfall effects on-site wastewater management systems.

What happens?

After persistent heavy rainfall, the soil surrounding the wastewater absorption area can become saturated. Saturation of the surrounding occurs when effluent entering the wastewater system from a dwelling, (ie. through showering, toileting, washing etc) goes into a wastewater trench that is surrounded by an already waterlogged environment.

The wastewater, having nowhere to go, can then back flow into the septic. When back flow occurs, the wastewater can make its way back to an overflow pipe where it will flow onto the surface at ground level. This can lead to public health risks and/or environmental contamination.

When the septic tank is overfilled, sewage can flow into the wastewater absorption area and overwhelm it, where it can then flow out into the environment as surface water. In this scenario the untreated waste (ie sludge/scum) can also clog up the wastewater absorption trench system, compromising the effectiveness of the system into the future.

Indications your wastewater system is not functioning properly

An obvious indicator that your system is struggling to perform are slow draining fixtures, such as sinks, toilets etc. as well as overflowing external drains.

If you notice this, consider contacting a qualified plumber promptly to investigate further. It could be a simple fix that if done proactively could avoid costly damage to your wastewater system.

Another indicator that your system may not be functioning properly is if your septic tank is at capacity with solids and requires a pump out (ie. desludge). This is a crucial part of the wastewater management process in maintaining an effective wastewater system and is recommended to be done at least every three years.

How can you fix it?

There are a number of ways to help your wastewater system cope with consistent rainfall events:

1. Reduce your water usage.

The most effective way to look after your wastewater system is to simply reduce water usage in your house. Shorter showers, less flushing of toilets and general water reduction behaviours go a long way to protecting your system from being compromised.

2. Pump out your septic tank.

Protect your wastewater system from irreparable damage by pumping out (i.e. desludging) your septic tank proactively or if tell-tale signs of a wastewater system failure are presenting. This can include boggy ground, odours, water pooling and dark green vegetative growth pluming from the wastewater absorption area or overflow pipe. Contact your plumber or a licenced liquid waste removalist for advice on having your septic tank pumped out.

3. Protect people from contaminated area

Consider how likely it is for the general public or vulnerable people (such as children playing in your yard) to interact with the wastewater that is presenting itself on the ground. If likely, take measures to rope off the contaminated area being mindful of not causing further damage to underground trenches if driving in stakes. Additionally, once the persistent rain has ceased, disinfecting the area is recommended to ensure public health risks are mitigated.

Ultimately, the absorption trenches and impacted area need time to recover. Warmer weather including sunny days will assist with drying out the ground, where the system can be monitored to ensure the area is safe to resume accessing and use.

Further information

If you would like further information, please contact councils Environmental Health unit on 6217 9570.