

GUIDANCE FOR SEPTIC SYSTEMS BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER AN EARTHQUAKE

STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO PROTECT YOUR HEALTH AND SEPTIC SYSTEM

Safety Reminders

- Get help from a septic system service professional for steps with this symbol .
- Steps with a  only apply to pressure distribution systems.
- Get help from a septic system service professional if any of the steps feel unsafe in your situation or your system loses power.
- Make sure power to the septic system is off before inspecting the area.
- Be careful walking near a damaged system.
- Wait to enter damaged structures until they are cleared by a trained inspector.
- Wear gloves and eye protection when inspecting your septic system.
- Never enter the pump chamber or septic tank.

Before the Earthquake

Take these steps to reduce the effects of an impending earthquake on your septic system.

- Maintain your septic system.
- **Know your septic system and take pictures or keep documents of the following** to reference later if there is damage:
 - Septic tank location.
 - Septic system records or drawings.
 - Electrical components.

- **Mark system components with a marker such as a rock, stake, or pin flag.**
- **Turn off electricity to the system** at the circuit breaker.
-  **Turn off your pump at the circuit box** if you have a pressure distribution or mound system.

During the Earthquake

- **Follow emergency and evacuation advice** for your area.
- **Eliminate all non-essential water use** and flush toilets as little as possible if evacuation is not needed.
- **Try to find other toilets if your septic system is damaged.** If there are not toilets available, see the guidance on temporary toilets below.

After the Earthquake

Consult with a septic system service professional and follow the steps below.

- **Rope off your septic system.** The manhole and tank covers may be damaged or missing.
-  **Stay out of the area if sewage backs up.** If the entire building is contaminated, abandon the building until all affected areas have been cleaned. A septic system service professional should be contacted to inspect and repair the system if it was flooded.
-  **Check for changes in how the septic system functions.** Be on the alert for changes in how appliances drain, wet or unusually green spots in your yard, odors from your system, activated alarm lights and buzzers, and/or a change in sounds from mechanical components. Contact a septic system service professional if any of these issues occur.

- **Reduce water use** until the system is inspected:

- **Avoid sending basement sump pump water into the septic system.**
- **Re-route water from roof gutters** away from the drain field area.
- **Take short showers**
- **Limit laundry and dishwashing**
- **Turn off the water** while brushing teeth, shaving, or rinsing dishes
- **Do not flush the toilet** each time it's used for liquid waste.

Professional System Inspection

Contact a septic system service professional for an inspection before using the septic system again.

An inspection may include the following:

- Open all parts of the system and see if debris entered the system. All sewage tanks should be pumped and cleaned out.
- Check for damage to above and below ground septic system components.
- Check for damage to piping where pipes enter the home.
- Make sure that inspection ports are free of blockage and damage. Replace and secure septic tank manhole covers as needed.
- Check the drain field and the area over the septic tank for depressions and damage from fallen debris. Repair with sod or seeding to provide good plant cover.
- Make sure wastewater moves between the parts of the system as intended.
- If your property was damaged, a month after the system is restarted, schedule a follow-up visit to check for proper operation.

OTHER SYSTEMS

If you have an advanced treatment unit or any other type of onsite wastewater treatment system not addressed above, contact a septic system service professional or your local health department.

Temporary Toilets

Only use a temporary toilet if there are no functioning toilets available.

- **Check to see if you can stay somewhere else.**

- **Contract a PortaPotty for temporary use.**

- **Modify your own toilet:**

- **Shut off the water valve** to the toilet. If you can't close it, try another option.
- **Flush out any water still in the bowl.**
- **Line your toilet bowl** (under the seat) with a plastic kitchen garbage bag inside of another kitchen bag.
- **Into the inner bag, put some kitty litter, dry peat moss, lime, or something similar** that will absorb liquid.
- **Do not mix urine and fecal material** if possible.
- **After using the toilet, close the inner plastic bag** with a plastic tie or other method.
- **Wash or sanitize your hands** after toilet use and waste handling.
- **Store full bags in a secure area.** Consider a watertight bucket or trashcan.
- **Dispose of the bags when possible.**

- **Use a five-gallon bucket as a toilet.** You can add a toilet seat and set it up like a modified toilet (above).

- **If you must dig a hole for your waste, make sure it's at least 200 feet** (70 adult steps) from water bodies and at least six inches deep. Fill it in after a single use, tamp the dirt down. This is a short-term option only and regulations may vary by jurisdiction.