



ISSUES WITH SEPTIC SYSTEMS DURING & AFTER HEAVY RAINFALL EVENTS

Heavy rains followed by flooding and saturated soils in Ventura County can cause major problems with your Onsite Wastewater Treatment System (OWTS), otherwise known as your septic system. Residents who rely on an OWTS (typically, a septic tank and drain field) may need to take precautions to prevent possible surfacing sewage and contamination of drinking water supplies and surface waters. As the soil in your dispersal system becomes saturated, wastewater cannot soak into the ground as usual, and it may rise to the surface, creating odors. Water can eventually back up into the septic tank, preventing your OWTS from functioning. You will notice slow draining, poor flushing, and, sometimes, overflow from floor and shower drains.

Human exposure to wastewater (sewage) can lead to disease transmission. Residents should check to ensure that their OWTS are not backing up, not allowing sewage to surface, or otherwise malfunctioning. If your area is affected by excessive rains where ground saturation or flooding has occurred, assess your OWTS, and be prepared to take the following steps:

1. OWTS may not function properly until the saturated ground or floodwaters recede, and the water table drops below the septic tank and dispersal system, (typically leach lines or seepage pits). Your OWTS will not function if your property is saturated or flooded and should not be used. Most septic tanks will not be damaged by the saturated ground or flood since they are below ground and completely covered. However, septic tanks can fill up with water from the saturated soil as water flows back into the septic tank through the drain field pipes.
2. Do NOT continue to discharge water from your plumbing fixtures if sewage backs up into the house. Raw sewage is a public health problem and can cause disease.
3. Only flush toilets when necessary, limit shower times or take sponge baths, and do not run water while brushing your teeth, shaving, or cleaning your dishes.
4. Turn off your lawn sprinklers over dispersal systems to minimize ground saturation.
5. Remove and discard any household items that become contaminated with sewage and cannot be disinfected, such as rugs, wall coverings, and drywall. Wear rubber boots and waterproof gloves when cleaning up sewage and always disinfect surfaces.
6. If the OWTS depends on a pump, it will not operate properly when the power is out or when the system controls are flooded. After the floodwaters recede and the pump is confirmed to be working properly, practice extreme water conservation to minimize the possibility of sewage backing up into the house.
7. Debris removal activities from a flood event may damage your OWTS. Vehicles can crush drain fields, septic tanks, and distribution boxes, especially when the soil is saturated. If you suspect your septic tank has been damaged, call a professional to inspect, service and clean it, and contact the Ventura County Environmental Health Division at 805/477-7136 if the system needs to be repaired.

<https://vcrma.org/en/onsite-wastewater-treatment-systems>