

COVID-19 and Your Onsite Sewage System

One aspect of rural life that may have been lost in this traumatic time is the health of the onsite sewage system that treats the wastewater generated in rural residences. With health officials suggesting and in some cases requiring “non-essential” workers remain at home, the onsite sewage system in nearly every rural residence has been placed under greater stress as family members who work outside the home were at home and using the onsite sewage system all day every day.

Modern Indiana onsite sewage systems are designed based on soil properties and the number of bedrooms in the house as well as out buildings that contribute to the sewage load. Systems installed after 1990 should be capable of treating the additional load if used within the limits of the onsite sewage system. Systems installed before 1990 are of great concern. Some may be fine, but many are likely not as capable and at much greater risk of failure. Any onsite sewage system can be made to fail if those in the home do not choose to live within the limits of the system.

Water conservation to limit the generation of wastewater is an essential part of successful living on an onsite sewage system. With extra suggested and needed hand washing this is going to require careful thought such as not allowing the water to run when soaping up. Lack of a specific schedule could encourage some to have longer than customary showers. While enjoyable at the time, these contribute to an additional load on the system. Unfortunately, many have experienced weight gain during this period of restriction. Some of this may be due to extra baking that has been accomplished to relive boredom. The waste generated in the baking process including fats, oils and flour represent high strength waste that is difficult to impossible for the onsite sewage system to properly handle. Similar concerns arise as sanitary wipes are used to sanitize surfaces are disposed of in the septic tank. These wipes will not break down in an onsite sewage system and just add to the floating load of fats oils and greases that forms above the treated effluent in a septic tank. There are many other aspects of living successfully on an onsite sewage system. Each family should take a few minutes to read these publications on onsite sewage systems to see if there are ways to improve the performance and lengthen the life of an onsite sewage system.

<https://www.extension.purdue.edu/extmedia/HENV/HENV-1.pdf>

<https://www.extension.purdue.edu/extmedia/HENV/HENV-107-w.pdf>

<https://www.extension.purdue.edu/extmedia/HENV/HENV-106-W.pdf>

<https://www.extension.purdue.edu/extmedia/HENV/HENV-105-W.pdf>

After careful consideration, it may be time to inspect the onsite sewage system and see if it is time to clean the system and to be sure the septic tank, distribution box, absorption field and any additional components are still performing as designed. The Indiana Onsite Wastewater Professionals Association has a list of certified onsite sewage system inspectors that can conduct an inspection of the entire system. These inspectors can determine if cleaning of the tank or other maintenance is required. Waiting until the problem is obvious may be too late.

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