



Missoula City-County Health Department

**ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH**

301 West Alder Street | Missoula MT 59802-4123  
www.missoulacounty.us/HealthDept

Phone | 406.258.4755

Fax | 406.258.4781

# Flood Recovery:

## Septic Systems

### **What is the risk?**

*The flood impacted several areas that are not served by the City of Missoula public sewer. Many flooded homes are connected to on-site septic systems. Septic systems commonly have problems, both during and after a flood.*

### **During the flood:**

*Under normal conditions, septic systems treat and dispose of wastewater through dry soil percolation (where bacteria and viruses are filtered out before hitting groundwater) and evapotranspiration (the process of water being transferred from the ground into the atmosphere by evaporation and uptake from plants). During a flood, the system is saturated or completely submerged and it cannot function. Bacteria, viruses, and anything else that goes down homes drains is flushed into the floodwater or into the high groundwater. This is one of the reasons why contact with floodwater can potentially make you sick.*

### **After the flood:**

*Even once your home or property is no longer actively flooding, you may still have to deal with septic system issues. Floods can cause sewage to back up in your home and can damage septic systems. Some systems may have been damaged to the point that they are no longer useable.*

### **Sewage from my septic system backed up in my home. What do I do?**

*Follow the steps below to clean and disinfect indoor areas that came into contact with sewage and/or floodwater:*

- **Wear protective, non-absorbent clothing** such as rubber boots and waterproof

gloves.

- **Discard** household items that cannot be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected. This might include carpet, upholstered furniture, and mattresses.
- **Clean** walls, hard-surfaced floors, and other household surfaces with soap and warm water.
- **Disinfect** clean surfaces with a household bleach solution of **½ cup of bleach in one gallon of water.**

***BE CAREFUL!*** Never mix ammonia cleaners with bleach! Toxic and potentially deadly vapors will form. Read cleaner labels to check for ammonia, as some brand names don't make it clear.

### **How do I know if my septic system is OK to use after the flood?**

*First, take a look at the area around the septic system. In places where the floodwater was moving, the system may have been uncovered as the topsoil washed away.*

- If the system is exposed, **don't use it and call the Health Department!** We can take a look at your system and let you know if it needs to be repaired or replaced, or if you can cover it back up with clean soil and continue to use it.

*Pump your septic tank(s) as soon as possible after the flood. This will remove silt, dirt, and debris that may have washed in. **Do not pump your tank if the area is still saturated or flooded!** This can cause the tank to float up out of the ground and will damage your system.*

*After you begin to use your system again, if you notice your house drains are abnormally slow, that sewage is surfacing outside on the ground, or that sewage is backing-up in your house, immediately discontinue use of the system.*

- Floodwater can clog parts of your septic system (tanks, sewer lines, and drainfield pipes) with silt and dirt. You may have to hire a professional septic service company to clean the system out for you before it will work.
- Even after the floodwater has receded, the ground may still be too wet for the system to take any sewage from a house. You may have to wait several days before the soil dries out and the system will work properly.

*In some cases, **the septic system may be too damaged, or may not ever work properly again.** If this happens to you, **call the Health Department.** We will work with you to find the best replacement system solution for your home and property.*

### **How do I know where my system is located?**

You can look for your septic permit record online at: [missoulacounty.us/septic](https://missoulacounty.us/septic). You can also call the Health Department or stop in our office any time Monday-Friday, 8-5, except the noon hour. Please be aware of the following things:

- There are several different types of septic systems. **Health Department staff will be able to give you information that is specific to your system type, location, and property.** This information is important when evaluating your system and will not be available in general guidance documents.
- **Not all systems have permit records.** This can be for a number of reasons, and our staff can help you understand why. Each situation is different. Call us or stop in. We want to help you through the flood recovery phase.

### **Other Important Information:**

- If you have to repair or replace your system, **you will need a permit** to do that. Contact the Health Department for permitting information.
- Any repair or replacement work must be done by a **Certified Septic Installer**. A list of installers is available on our website: [missoulacounty.us/septic](https://missoulacounty.us/septic)
- **Don't worry!** Missoula County regulations allow homeowners to install permitted replacement systems, even in the floodplain.