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# Extension Extra

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Agriculture and  
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## Septic System Additives — Not Needed

by Russell Derickson, Extension water and natural resources specialist,  
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If your on-site wastewater treatment system develops problems or fails, don't be so anxious to find a solution that you'll try any product that comes along. Many people with septic systems are confused by magazine and TV advertisements, as well as telephone solicitations, for on-site system additives. *On-site system additives are not needed and are not recommended by the South Dakota Cooperative Extension Service.*

To understand why *you do not need on-site system additives*, evaluate the product by answering the following questions:

- Are product claims based on reputable lab tests or are they simply testimonials of past users?
- Will the product cause damage to other parts of the wastewater treatment system?
- Will the product cause a pollution problem in ground water or the environment?

On-site system additives can be classified into two general categories: they are either safe, or they are effective. The effective additives are not safe, and the safe additives are not effective. Unsafe additives travel to the treatment field and cause groundwater contamination.

Some additive companies claim that on-site system problems are caused by household cleaners and that their product will resupply needed bacteria populations. Their products contain yeasts or bacteria to stimulate microorganism action in the septic tank.

Normal or average use of household cleaning chemicals will not cause problems with on-site systems. Every time the toilet is flushed or the sink is drained, bacteria are naturally resupplied to the septic tank. If bacterial activity in the septic tank is low, it is because the homeowner has added a detrimental product to the wastewater stream.

Other companies sell cleaners or degreasers as additives that agitate septic tanks and cause scum and sludge to enter soil treatment fields. They claim that their products will eliminate the need for septic tank pumping by resuspending solids and flushing them into the treatment

fields. Once in the treatment field, the solids plug soil pores. Plugged soil pores cause a reduction in the treatment field's capacity and efficiency. *Septic tanks are specifically designed to trap and prevent solids and floating materials from entering soil treatment fields.*

### The best advice for homeowners.:

- Do not purchase septic system additives.
- Pump septic tanks on a regular 3- to 5-year cycle.  
Pumping septic tanks is the best preventative maintenance measure for on-site systems.

To evaluate your on-site system's performance, obtain a copy of Farm•A•Syst Worksheet 6 or a Home•A•Syst packet from your local county Extension office. These materials include a factsheet on proper on-site system management. Completing the worksheet will give you a good estimation of how well your on-site system is being maintained.

To learn more about on-site systems, contact your local county Extension agent, a certified on-site wastewater treatment contractor, or a septic tank pumper. You also can purchase a copy of MWPS-24 "On-site Domestic Sewage Disposal Handbook" (\$6), available from the SDSU Agricultural Engineering Dept. Box 2120, Brookings, SD 57007, 605-688-5667.

Ask at your County Extension Office for these free publications about on-site wastewater treatment:

- EC 665 Rural Wastewater Treatment for Individual Homes
- ExEx 1018 Septic Tank Maintenance
- ExEx 1032 Wastewater Treatment for Rural Homes and Cabins
- ExEx 1033 Periodic Maintenance for On-site Wastewater Treatment Systems
- ExEx 1034 Solving On-site Wastewater System Backups

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