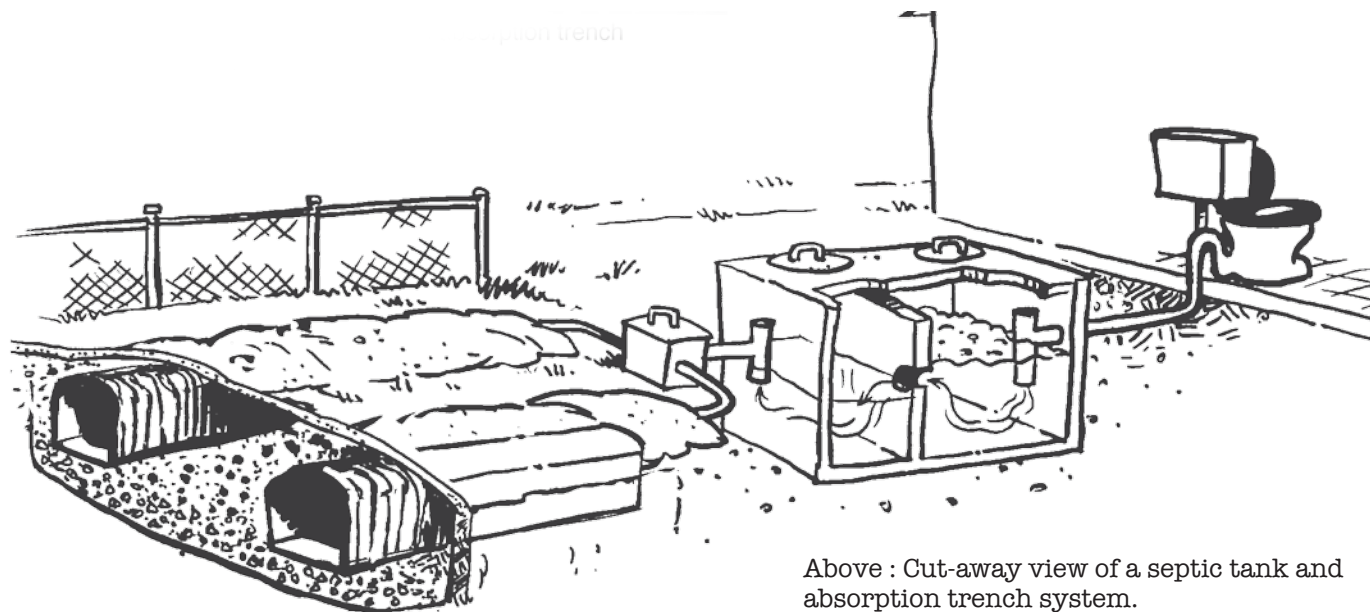


How to look after your septic system



Above : Cut-away view of a septic tank and absorption trench system.

About one in three houses in remote Indigenous communities have a type of septic system for their waste water (from drains, showers and some toilets). Septic systems are mostly in smaller communities that don't need a large shared sewerage system. The key to having a good septic system that keeps working is:

- Making sure it is put in properly.
- Looking after it so it keeps working.

PARTS OF A SEPTIC SYSTEM

Septic systems have two main parts:

- The septic tank.
- The effluent disposal (absorption trenches, effluent ponds or pumped systems).



The lid of a concrete septic tank.

The septic tank is the first part of a septic system. It looks like a big, long barrel, usually made of plastic or concrete.

HOW A SEPTIC SYSTEM WORKS

Septic systems collect all the waste water from a house in a big underground tank. Heavy solids (like poo or toilet paper) sink to the bottom of the tank. Lighter particles (like oils, fats and some hair) float to the top. Living bugs called micro-organisms break down the heavy solids which form a layer called sludge. Another layer floats on top and is called the scum.

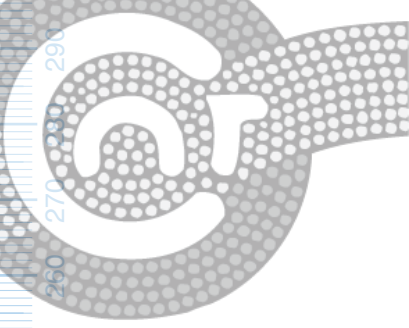
Once the scum and sludge are separated in the tank, the rest of the water flows through to the effluent disposal system. In most cases this is an absorption trench but can sometimes be a shared system with effluent ponds or have further treatment and be used for irrigation.

HOW TO KEEP THE SEPTIC SYSTEM WORKING WELL

If the system is properly designed and built it can be kept working well with a few simple practices:

- Regular pump-outs: the system needs to be pumped out every 2–5 years, or every year if there are many people in one house.
- Looking after trenches: make sure no cars or vehicles drive over the trenches, this means you might need to fence off the area. Make sure rain water doesn't pool over the trenches, this may mean digging other trenches or piping stormwater to a different area.
- Checking and repairing leaks: leaking taps and toilets

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A new absorption trench being installed.

can send a lot of extra water to a septic system and overload it stopping it working. This means changing tap washers and seals.

- Controlling what goes down the drain: Only a few things are meant to go down the drain and many break a septic system. The only solids that should enter a septic system are poo and toilet paper. Try not to pour oil and fat down the drain. Bleaches and commercial cleaners can kill the bugs in the septic tank. Vinegar and baking soda work well for cleaning and will make sure the septic keeps working too.

HOW TO TELL IF SOMETHING IS WRONG

Sometimes things go wrong. If the septic system is not working well some of the following things might happen:

- There is a bad smell around the system, like sulphur or rotten egg gas.
- The toilets or drains clog up or take a long time to drain.
- A lot of green grass is growing around absorption trenches.
- Water pools up around absorption trenches or the ground is squishy.

If any of these things happen you should call someone to help out. A broken septic system can make people sick and cost a lot to fix up if you don't act quickly. Depending on where you are you may need to call your local housing organisation, resource agency, a plumber or septic pumper.

Often these things happen if the system isn't looked after properly. Leaking taps, the wrong things being put down the drain, broken absorption trenches or not enough pump-outs can all cause these problems.

WHERE TO GO FOR MORE HELP AND ADVICE

If you're not clear on something, you can give CAT a call on 08 8959 6100. Other people you can talk to are:

- Your Environmental Health Worker or Officer (EHW/EHO)
- Your municipal or essential services officer at your shire or resource agency.
- Your local plumber or septic specialist.

USEFUL RESOURCES:

These resources are very useful for helping you check and maintain your septic tank:

www.septic-tank-guide.com

CAT BUSH TECH 27: Septic Tanks and Absorption Trenches by Michael Martin. These can be downloaded at www.icat.org.au

Derwent Valley Council Septic Tank Pumping Guide: www.derwentvalley.tas.gov.au/site/page.cfm?u=281

National Indigenous Infrastructure Guide , Chapter B3 Wastewater, These can be downloaded at www.icat.org.au

The Easy Septic Guide, NSW Department of Local Government: www.dlg.nsw.gov.au/septic.htm

What you need to know about septic tank systems: www.manningham.vic.gov.au/maccwrl/_assets/main/lib90027/02%20-%20pdf%20files/a%20guide%20to%20septic%20systems%20and%20operation%20maintenance.pdf