Why should you be concerned?

Virtually all rural residents use a septic system or some type of on-site waste water disposal system. While these systems are generally economical and safe, household waste water can contain contaminants that may harm water quality.

Potential contaminants in household waste water can include disease-causing bacteria, infectious viruses, household chemicals, and excess nutrients, such as nitrogen.

What can you do?

This chapter has been designed to provide information on questions you have answered Yes, or do not know the answer to in the Assessing Your Household Waste Water Treatment System section of your “Farm and Home Water Quality Assessment.” This chapter will help you develop an Action Plan to reduce the risks of contamination to your drinking water supply.
1 Do you have an on-site wastewater disposal system (septic tank and drain field, see page pit, or cesspool)?

Household wastewater treatment systems are used to treat and dispose of waste water from the home.

A household wastewater treatment system that is properly constructed and maintained will function for many years and can minimize the potential for ground and surface water contamination.

Most states have regulations addressing on-site wastewater disposal systems. For example, in most areas it is illegal to install a seepage pit or a cesspool.

An individual household wastewater treatment system, sometimes called a septic system, typically consists of a septic tank and drain field. Wastewater from bathrooms, kitchen, and laundry room is routed to the septic tank where liquids and solids are separated.

Soft solids such as grease and soap float to the top and form a scum layer. Other solids settle to the bottom where they can be partially decomposed by bacteria.

Liquid from the septic tank is discharged into the drain field where harmful, disease causing microorganisms, organics, and nutrients are removed or broken down.

Consider both system design and location when assessing the potential for groundwater contamination.

It is also important to avoid driving heavy machinery on drain field area. This can damage the drain field by crushing pipes and compacting absorption area.
Is your septic tank less than 50 feet from any water supply system (well, cistern, etc.)?

A primary concern related to the location of your septic system is that it is a safe distance from your water supply system. In Washington, home septic tanks are required to be at least 50 feet from a drinking water well or cistern while drainfields must be at least 100 feet from them.

Contact your county or state Health office to determine minimum separation distances for your system.

Is your septic system closer than 100 feet from a water body (streams, lakes, coastal waters, etc.)?

If your septic system is located near a surface water body, there is an increased chance of impacting water quality. Discharges from improperly maintained systems may directly enter a surface water body and may pollute the water.
4 Has it been longer than 3 years since you had your septic tank cleaned out?

Poor management of your septic system increases the risk of your drinking water becoming contaminated. Proper maintenance is one of the most important factors in making sure a septic system will function over a long period of time. Maintenance involves regular pumping and limiting the types of materials disposed of to those that the system can handle.

Most properly sized septic tanks need the solids pumped out every two to three years. If a garbage disposal is used, a septic system should be pumped out every one to two years. These are just estimations and the actual time between septic tank pumping will depend on the amount of solids entering your tank.

5 Do you dump grease, oil, or leftover household chemicals down your drain?

You should always avoid dumping grease and oil down your drain. They can plug the pipes or build up in the septic tank. Keep a separate container for used grease and oil. Properly dispose of them with other household garbage.

Household chemicals that are poured down the drain can damage your waste water disposal system. Bacteria present in the septic system break down the sewage. When household chemicals are added to the system, they may destroy the beneficial bacteria, reducing the effectiveness of the sewage treatment process.
## Assessing Your Household Waste Water Treatment System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If you answered &quot;Yes&quot; to the following questions.</th>
<th>What to do</th>
<th>Who to call</th>
<th>Other References</th>
<th>What you did</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questions 1, 2, 3</td>
<td>Know the location of your waste water disposal system.</td>
<td>County Health unit, county or regional sanitarian, local Extension Service office, septic system installer or pumper.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Test water for bacteria and nitrate.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learn the risks related to runoff and your soil type.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question 4</strong></td>
<td>Monitor septic tank and pump scum and sludge when needed.</td>
<td>Local septic tank pumping service or local Extension Service office.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question 5</strong></td>
<td>Do not dispose of grease, oil or other household chemicals down your drain or toilet.</td>
<td>Local sanitation department or local Extension Service office.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Determine where these materials can be safely disposed of.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>