

Time to get your septic system ready for winter

Here are five tips that can help you prevent costly problems later this winter.

1. Prevent freezing in the first place

Insulation is key to preventing pipes and drainfields from freezing. Allowing grass to grow an extra six inches over the entire system (septic tank, connecting pipes and drainfield/mound) in the fall can protect them from frost. Another good insulator is a layer of mulch (straw, leaves, hay, etc.) spread 8 to 12 inches deep over the system.

2. Don't let it drip and keep it hot

Dripping faucets trickle water into the system which can cause ice to build up and eventually freeze a pipe closed, often right where the septic pipe leaves the home. Fix all leaks and keep the system "energized" with regular doses of warm water during the winter – the warmer the better. Spread out your laundry schedule so you run one warm/hot load a day. Use the dishwasher and take hot baths. However, **do not** leave water running all the time, as this will overload the septic system.



3. Keep off of the grass (and snow)

Keep all vehicle, animal and human traffic off the system. This is a good rule to follow all year long as compacted snow and soils cause frost to go down deeper and faster. Pay special attention to the area between the house and the septic tank. Stay off these areas even during the winter as compacted snow provides much less insulation than undisturbed snow.

4. Keep new systems under cover

A new septic system covered with bare soil can have problems with freezing the first year. Cover a new tank, mound/drainfield with an insulating layer of mulch or similar loose material.



5. It's frozen. Now what?

If your septic system freezes, call a septic system professional. The MPCA website includes a search tool for finding certified professionals in your area. The pros have devices called steamers and high-pressure jetters for thawing pipes.

If it's not feasible to correct a problem, the only option is using the septic tank as a holding tank until the system thaws naturally in the spring. Have a pumper empty the tank when it starts to fill up.

For more information on keeping your system healthy all year, visit the University of Minnesota's Onsite Sewage Treatment Program website.