

Household Items - What to Flush?

Whether you've had a septic system for some time or are new to life on a septic system, you've probably wondered what items are OK to flush and what items are not. Here are some questions we often hear:

Q. What items should I avoid flushing down my drain?

A. Because septic systems use biological processes to treat waste, a good rule of thumb is to flush nothing into your septic system that hasn't been ingested first. Exceptions to this are toilet tissue, mild detergents, and wash water. Here's a list of common items to keep out of your system:

- Chemical drain cleaners, oven cleaners, and other products containing lye
- Backwash brine from water softeners
- Unused medicines and pharmaceuticals
- Excessive amounts of household cleaners, including chlorine bleach
- Any pool or spa product
- Pesticides, weed killer, fertilizers, and other lawn and garden chemicals
- RV waste that includes holding tank deodorants and stabilizers
- Flammable or toxic products
- Floor wax and rug cleaners
- Paint and paint thinners
- Excessive amounts of bath and body oils
- Grease and oils
- Detergents, cleaning agents, and degreasers that contain phosphates
- Washing machine lint
- Feminine hygiene products and condoms
- Diapers
- Tobacco products and cigarette butts
- Bubble gum
- Ground-up table scraps and eggshells
- Additives that claim to enhance septic system performance

Q. I occasionally use a chemical drain cleaner to keep my pipes clear. Is this OK?

A. We don't recommend using chemical drain cleaners or flushing any products containing lye into your system. The bacteria inside your septic system are vital for treating wastewater before it's discharged. Even small amounts of lye have a harmful effect on the biological activity within your septic system. Use a plunger or a pipe snake to unclog your drains instead, or remove and clean your pipe traps.

Q. I'm considering having a water softener installed. Should the backwash brine be flushed into my septic tank?

A. No. We recommend against plumbing backwash brine into your septic tank. Our experience indicates backwash brine can displace the sludge layer and disrupt the scum layer in your septic tank, which can lead to early and expensive drainfield failure. There is also evidence that backwash brine negatively affects the biology in your septic system.

Q. I've heard it's OK to dispose of unused medications by flushing them. Is this true?

A. We strongly recommend against flushing any unused medications into any septic tank. Many of them will harm the biology of your septic system. Additionally, most pharmaceuticals pass untreated through any wastewater treatment system and are dispersed into the environment.

Remember to follow all federal, state, and local laws regarding safe transport and disposal of controlled substances when disposing of medications. Several national projects, including the Product Stewardship Initiative, are underway to make recycling or disposal of unused medications simpler, safer, and easier. In addition, some communities offer a pharmaceutical take-back program.

Q. I use an automatic toilet bowl cleaner. Will this create issues for my septic system?

A. Some automatic toilet bowl cleaners release high levels of chlorine into your septic system with every flush. Since high chlorine levels can have a harmful effect on the biology of your septic system, we recommend against them.

Q. Why are pool and spa products harmful to my septic system?

A. Most pool and spa products are formulated to kill bacteria, often by using high levels of chlorine. Since your septic system relies on healthy bacteria for proper treatment, we recommend against putting any pool or spa products into your system.

Q. Can I use chlorine bleach for my laundry?

A. The small amounts of chlorine bleach typically used for laundry won't upset the performance of your septic system.

Q. So lye and chlorine can negatively affect my tank's biological processes. Are there other harmful chemicals I need to be aware of?

A. We recommend you avoid excessive or unnecessary discharges of any household chemicals into your septic tank.

Pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, and other toxic chemicals are harmful to septic tank biology and can remain harmful beyond the drainfield.

Recreational vehicle (RV) holding tank deodorants and stabilizers are very harmful to septic system biology. Even when labeled "biodegradable," these products often biodegrade into other harmful chemicals that can damage the biology in your system.

Other chemicals can emulsify, or mix, the layers in the tank and pass them on through the system, which can clog effluent filters, pumps, lines, and drainfields. Paints, waxes, and oils can also degrade the performance of your septic system and clog drainfields.

Q. Do I need to stop using bath and body oils?

A. Occasional small amounts of bath and body oils won't typically harm your septic system. Large amounts of bath or body oils can quickly pass through your septic tank and clog pumps, drainfield lines and the drainfield itself. This is especially likely when oils are mixed with effluent by emulsifying agents such as phosphates or strong detergents.

Q. My dishwashing detergent contains phosphates. Will this harm my septic system?

A. Phosphates are strong emulsifiers (mixing agents). When combined with grease and oils, they allow the grease and oils in your tank to flow out and clog pumps, lines, and drainfields. Additionally, phosphates contribute heavily to aquatic algae blooms that harm aquatic life and water quality in our rivers, lakes and streams.

We recommend phosphorus-free dishwashing detergents. There are several brands of phosphorus-free or low-phosphorus dishwashing detergents that use enzymes, which clean as well as brands that contain phosphorus.

Q. I've heard that powdered laundry detergents should be avoided. Why?

A. Many powdered detergents contain non-biodegradable plastic fillers, which can collect in your drainfield and septic tank and clog drain lines. Also, some powdered laundry detergents contain phosphates.

We recommend liquid detergents or powdered detergents that are free from phosphates, chlorine, and fillers.

Q. Can lint from my washing machine create problems for my septic system?

A. Yes. Lint can build up inside your septic tank, increasing the amount of maintenance required and therefore the cost of maintaining your system. If your septic system does not have an outlet filter, or if your filter is not cleaned regularly, lint can end up in your drainfield, clogging drain line holes and reducing the life of your drainfield.

We recommend installing a lint filter on the discharge line of your washing machine. This will greatly reduce the amount of lint that can be discharged into your septic system.

Q. What other items can create problems for my septic system?

A. Fibrous items such as cigarette butts, sanitary napkins, tampons, cloth diapers, paper towels, and large quantities of hair, and other items such as chewing gum, matches, condoms, and plastics can clog pipes, effluent filters, pumps, and drain lines, which can lead to costly maintenance.

Disposable diapers are another clogging hazard, and they are not biodegradable. Non-biodegradable materials in your tank will stay in your system and remain a potential hazard until your tank is pumped.

Q. *Since food is digestible, why do you recommend against ground-up table scraps?*

A. Ground-up table scraps aren't usually a problem in themselves. However, they will accelerate solids accumulation in your tank, which leads to more frequent pump-out intervals.

Sometimes ground-up table scraps contain fats and oils that prevent them from settling quickly. When this happens, they contribute to Total Suspended Solids (TSS).

Q. *Are there any other recommendations from Orenco regarding the use of household chemicals or other items I should know about?*

A. Because many of the chemicals used around the house end up in the septic system, we recommend replacing hazardous household chemicals with non-toxic alternatives whenever possible. We've included some suggestions below. Remember, if you do use hazardous household chemicals, be careful to avoid flushing them into your system.

- **Dishwashing detergents:** Choose detergents that are low in phosphates or phosphate-free. Many products are available that are phosphate-free and friendly to septic tanks.
- **Laundry products:** Choose products that are eco-friendly and labeled safe for septic systems. If you do choose to use a powdered laundry detergent, choose one that is free of phosphates, chlorine, and fillers.
- **Ammonia-based cleaning products:** Use baking soda sprinkled on a damp sponge or, for windows, use a solution of two tablespoons white vinegar to one quart water.
- **Disinfectants:** Use one half cup borax to one gallon water for disinfecting and deodorizing.
- **Scouring cleaners and powders** - Sprinkle baking soda on a damp sponge or add four tablespoons baking soda to one quart warm water. Or use Bon Ami[®] cleaning powder, an inexpensive, commercially available product that won't scratch.
- **Carpet/upholstery cleaners** - To freshen carpets, sprinkle on dry cornstarch or baking soda, then vacuum. For tough carpet and upholstery stains, blot with white vinegar in soapy water.
- **Toilet cleaners** - Sprinkle on baking soda or Bon Ami cleaning powder; then scrub with a toilet brush.
- **Furniture/floor polishes** - Use oil soap and warm water to clean; then dry with a soft cloth. To polish, use one part lemon juice and two parts vegetable or olive oil. We also recommend natural products with lemon oil or beeswax in mineral oil.
- **Metal cleaners** - Clean brass and copper with half a used lemon dipped in salt. Use a scouring pad and mild soap for stainless steel. For silver, rub gently with toothpaste on a soft wet cloth.
- **Oven cleaners** - To avoid oven cleaners containing lye, quickly sprinkle salt on drips, then scrub. For older or tougher spills and stains, use baking soda and a scouring pad. If you do use commercial oven cleaners containing lye, use paper towels and disposable scrubbers, and don't rinse anything out into your sink.