MOYNE SHIRE COUNCIL

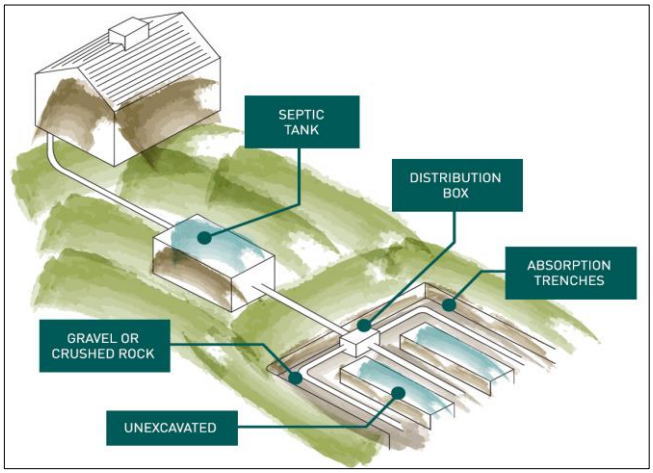
FACTSHEET 4: SEPTIC SYSTEM - TROUBLE-SHOOTING

As a septic system owner you are responsible for ensuring that your septic system is safe and working properly. A failing septic system is a health risk for your family and the community and may be causing harm to the environment.

If your system is smelly or the toilet is backing up, this is often a sign that the tank is overdue for a pump-out. Septic tanks need 'de-sludging' every 3-5 years otherwise solids build up and reduce the working volume.

When this happens the wastewater has less time to settle and solids flow into the absorption trench and clog it up. This drastically shortens the life of the trench and may require costly repairs.

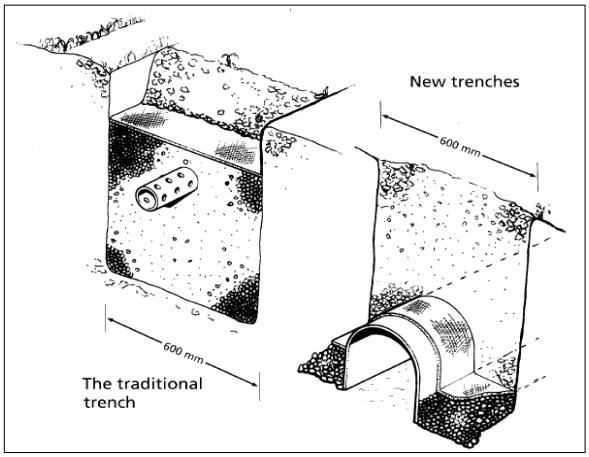
Newly pumped-out septic tanks should be filled with clean water and a handful of lime should be added to reduce odours and encourage helpful bacteria.



Trench warfare

The other place to check if your septic system isn't working properly is around the absorption trench. The absorption trench is where the effluent flows after it leaves the tank. Reln drain or perforated pipe is laid in a gravel trench and covered with soil. Effluent seeps through the archway or pipe and is absorbed by the soil. Soil processes further treat the effluent reducing pollutants and pathogens.

Don't wait until the trench starts to fail before having your tank pumped. With septic systems, an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure!



How to keep your absorption trench working well

Clogged trenches are a common cause of septic system problems. Trenches fail when they get blocked and effluent is unable to evaporate or drain away.

You can tell if the trench has failed because the area will be soggy, smelly, and covered with dense grass. Absorption trenches should last for 15-20 years, but if they are not well built and maintained properly the trench life can be reduced to as little as two years.

What can you do to fix a failed trench? It's best to contact Council or consult a plumber. In the meantime, there are some simple DOs and DON'Ts to help keep your absorption trenches working well.

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PORT FAIRY OFFICE - Princes Street Port Fairy VIC 3284 Tel: (03) 5568 0555 Fax: (03) 5568 2515
MORTLAKE OFFICE - 1 Jamieson Avenue Mortlake VIC 3272 Tel: (03) 5558 7888 Fax: (03) 5599 2304
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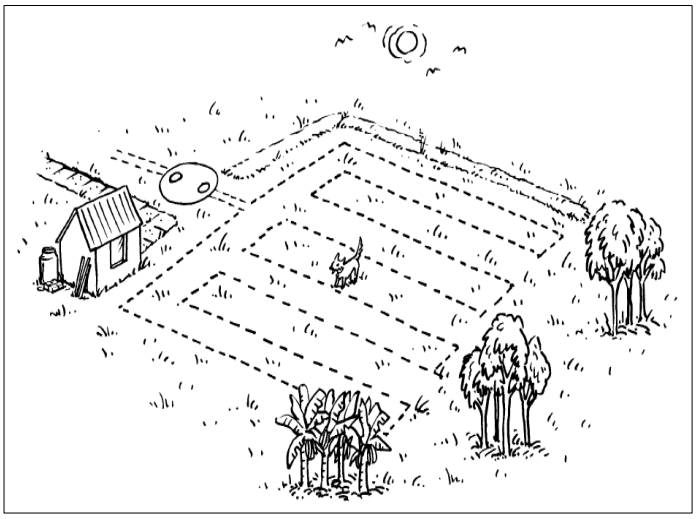
Trench DOs

- Ensure that the proper soil tests are done to determine the type of absorption system to be used and how large it should be.
- A reserve effluent application area should also be identified in case a new trench system is needed later.
- Plant small trees or shrubs down-slope and away from your trench system to help absorb effluent.
- Use water-loving and shallow rooted plants, such as sedges, rushes, grasses, and wetland plants.
- Consider installing a dual trench system so the separate trenches and soil areas can be rested alternately.

  They will perform better and last much longer. Dual disposal areas should be swapped over every 12 months or so.
- Build a small earth bund wall (a small ridge about 15 cm high) or diversion drain that is longer than, and uphill from the trench area, to divert surface runoff water around it.

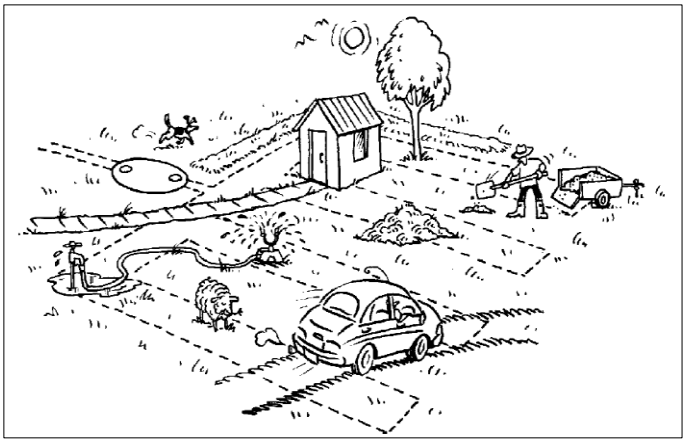
  This will help to reduce the load on your trench in wet weather.



This is a well maintained absorption area.

Trench DON'Ts

- Do not build structures on the absorption trench or plant trees that will shade it.
- The area should be in full sun to help plant growth, evaporation and pathogen breakdown.
- Do not drive over or disturb the stormwater diversion contour mounds.
- Small trees should be planted at least 5m away, large trees should be over 20m away, if not the roots will harm the trenches.



Don't treat your absorption area like this!

- Don't flood the disposal area with sprinklers or hoses.
- Don't drive cars on the trench area or graze animals there. Any heavy movement may break the pipework or the dome cover and will compress the soil. A small fence will let visitors know which areas to avoid.
- Don't cover the absorption trench area with concrete, pavers, etc.
- Don't store loads of soil or other materials on your absorption trench area.
- Don't place extra topsoil on top of your trench to 'soak up' overflowing effluent. If the trench area is soggy or water is pooling over the trench, it's best to call a plumber and have it checked.
- Don't let children play in the absorption trench area.

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Performing your own septic tank checks

The diagrams in this section describes a simple method to determine the sludge and scum levels and basic health of your septic tank. Please follow the safety precautions listed below and if in doubt seek the services of a plumber. To catch septic problems before they get out of hand, do this simple septic safe check-up at least once a year.

The DO-IT-YOURSELF ONCE-A-YEAR - 20-minute SEPTIC CHECK-UP

1. Carefully open the inspection cover - you may need a heavy screwdriver - and then stand clear for a while. Keep naked flames well away. Check the fluid level near the outlet. Use a torch if necessary. Fluid should be no higher than the outlet pipe at the wall of the tank (there should only be floating 'scum' above this level). *Warning* – Wear protective gloves and wash hands.

2. If you have an effluent (septic tank) filter, check it is working. **Action:** If it's clogged – rinse it clean with a hose so the drainage goes back into the septic tank. If it doesn't clean up, replace the filter cartridge. *Warning* – Wear protective gloves and wash hands.

3. If you have absorption trenches check the area carefully. It should not be soggy, should not smell and should not have prolific grass growth. Grass should be kept well mown and clippings removed. **Action:** If it's soggy, smells or is overgrown with dense grass, there may be too much water flowing into your septic, or the trenches may be exhausted. You should call a plumber or septic system specialist.

4. Check all drains and toilets in the house are working properly. **Action:** If drains and toilets are slow to empty, the pipes may be blocked or the septic system may be full or the trenches may be clogged or exhausted. You should call a plumber or septic system specialist.

If you are unsure, it's best to consult a specialist. Access the Yellow Pages online for a list of plumbers, septic pumpers, or septic system specialists.

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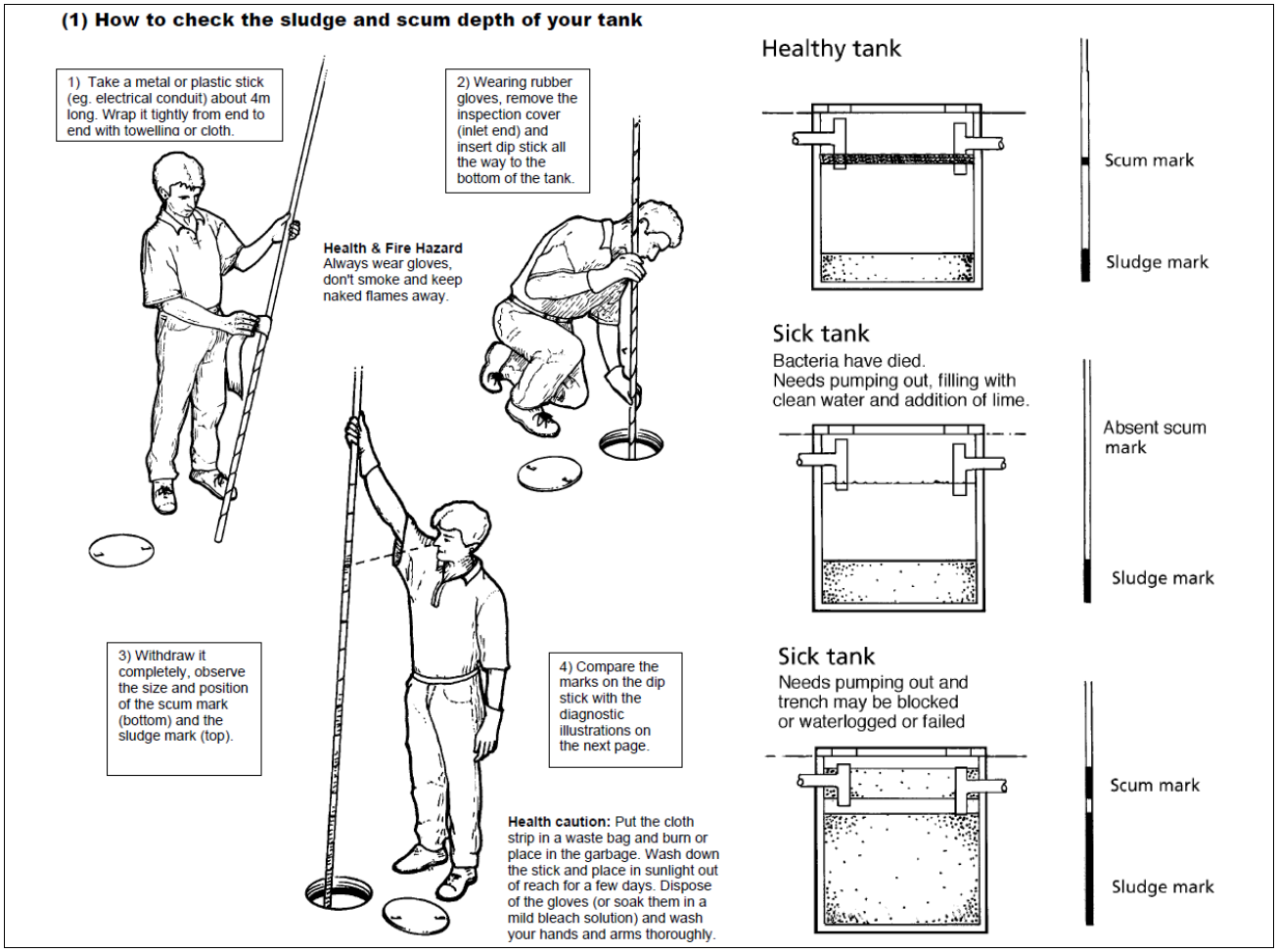

Checking sludge and scum levels in your septic tank.

Stay safe!
Don't attempt to repair a septic system yourself – get a licensed plumber.
Council approval is required for repairs/changes to your septic system.
If you are checking your septic system, ***REMEMBER:***

- *sewage contains germs that can cause disease;*
- *septic tanks contain toxic and explosive gases;*
- *never enter a septic tank and avoid breathing fumes;*
- *never smoke or use naked flames near an open septic tank;*
- *be sure the area is well ventilated, allow some time for gases to clear;*
- *be sure someone is watching you and can call for assistance if necessary;*
- *switch of the power - electrical controls are a shock and spark hazard;*
- *when done, secure the septic tank lid so that children cannot open it.*

Information Guide adapted from existing EHPA, Dept. of Local Government NSW &Tweed Shire Council resources. Moyne Shire Council acknowledges these sources.

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