A septic tank is an underground sewage-collection system. The tank itself is a watertight container constructed of a sound, durable material resistant to corrosion or decay.

When choosing a septic tank, your selection should be determined by the number of bedrooms or fixture units to be served. New Mexico Plumbing Code requires the following septic tank sizes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Single family dwelling size</th>
<th>Minimum septic tank size in gallons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–2 bedrooms</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 bedrooms</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 bedrooms</td>
<td>1200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–6 bedrooms</td>
<td>1500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How Often Should You Pump?

This depends on the following:
- Capacity of septic tank
- Flow of wastewater
- Volume of solids in wastewater

Volume of wastewater flow is determined by the type and frequency of common household activities. Water conservation practices in the home will help to limit the flow into the system. Use of an in-sink garbage disposal will increase the volume of solids. Care should be given to the type and amount of solids disposed of through a garbage disposal.

Table 1 gives the pumping frequencies according to the size of the septic tank. Please note that biological and chemical septic tank additives are not necessary and do not eliminate the need for pumping.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tank size (gal)</th>
<th>Household size (number of people)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>750</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000</td>
<td>12 6 4 3 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1250</td>
<td>16 8 5 3 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500</td>
<td>19 9 6 4 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1750</td>
<td>22 11 7 5 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: More frequent pumping needed if garbage disposal is used.

Safe Use of Septic Systems

Do not put substances such as motor oil, gasoline, paints, thinners, and pesticides in drains. These materials may pollute the groundwater and are toxic to the microorganisms that maintain an active septic system.

Moderate use of household cleaners, disinfectants, detergents, or bleaches will do little harm to the system, but remember that where there is a high density of septic systems there may be a cumulative impact on groundwater from household cleaners.
Fats, grease, coffee grounds, paper towels, sanitary napkins, disposable diapers, and other such items will clog your septic system.

**Protect the Absorption Field**

Keep automobiles and heavy equipment off the absorption field.

Grass cover and shallow-rooted plants are beneficial over the absorption field, but the deep roots of trees and shrubs stress and may plug nearby drain tiles. Do not fertilize the soil above the drain field.

Grass on the surface of an absorption field should be mowed regularly to promote evaporation and removal of water through the leaves. This helps prevent water from unnecessarily infiltrating the soil above the absorption field.

**Conserve Water**

Remember to consider the capacity of your septic system when installing new appliances or plumbing.

Limit the water entering the tank. Use water-saving fixtures. Repair toilet float valves, leaks, and dripping faucets.

**Avoid Septic Tank Additives**

Yeasts, bacteria, enzymes, and chemicals are sold with the claim of helping septic systems work better; however, there is no scientific evidence that additives are effective. In fact, some cleaners allow the solids in an overloaded tank to be re-suspended and clog the drainage lines.

Additives are not an alternative to proper maintenance and do not eliminate the need for routine pumping of a septic tank.

Commercial biological additives are not necessary for restarting decomposition after pumping because the sludge residue contains active microorganisms.

**How to Recognize Problems**

Learn how to recognize problems with septic systems. For example, unusually lush and green grass over your drain field may indicate trouble. Also, pay attention to slow-draining toilets or drains, sewage odors, or sewage backing up into the house or over the drain field.

**Checklist for Good Septic Tank Maintenance**

- Check your system annually for leaks and sludge.
- Have your septic tank pumped by a licensed pumping contractor.
- Practice water conservation. Repair leaky faucets and toilets. Spread clothes washing over the entire week, and operate only with a full load of laundry.
- Learn the location of your septic systems. Make a map and keep it handy.
- Keep a maintenance record.