



Old Style "Block Construction" Cesspools Present Significant Safety Hazards

Are you a Long Island resident living in a home constructed prior to 1973? If you are, then as a homeowner you need to be aware of the reality that your septic system can collapse. The event of a collapsing septic system can be slow and methodical, or fast and violent. Either process is potentially dangerous to you and your family.

Long Island homes constructed prior to 1973 have septic systems comprised of one or more cesspools. Cesspools, also known as seepage pits, or leaching pits, are large man-made caverns below the earth's surface in which waste water generated from the household drains into the soil. Prior to 1973, the standard materials for constructing cesspools were red brick, cement block, or sometimes a combination of both. Large holes were excavated in which the blocks and/or brick were installed creating open bottom cylinders with an arched dome. The soil was then backfilled and graded completing the standard septic system of that time. Cesspools during this era have provided years of drainage for homeowners yet the question remains, "How long will the cesspools last?" Years of continual drainage, servicing, and natural elements cause deterioration within the cesspool and thus weaken its structural integrity. As the cesspool's walls or domes weaken they eventually give way to gravity allowing the surrounding earth next to and above the cesspool to give way and collapse.

The collapse of a cesspool can be either slow or fast depending on the conditions both within and surrounding the cesspool. Slowly collapsing cesspools often result when one or more blocks/bricks have given way and have fallen inside the cesspool. Commonly, the collapse is evidenced on the surface starting with a small sinkhole. The sinkhole starts small (less than a foot deep) and becomes larger and deeper until eventually the cesspool gives way and caves in upon itself. These areas of depression are very dangerous and should never be approached by a homeowner. If you notice an area of depression or sinkhole in or around the septic system notify a licensed septic contractor immediately for further investigation. Conversely, the rapidly collapsing cesspool is also the most dangerous. Rapid collapses result when the entire cesspool gives way simultaneously taking in all soil and matter around and above it. Rapidly collapsing cesspools are typically caused by excessively saturated soils resulting from heavy rain, snow, and the first thaw at winter's end. Block cesspools can also collapse after being serviced. The absence of the outward pressure from within the cesspool can allow for the walls to cave in. Licensed septic contractors inform homeowners of these conditions after services are provided. Homeowner's should take precaution to avoid standing above or near the cesspools, as they are particularly volatile during these periods. The result of a rapidly collapsed cesspool is an open crater requiring immediate replacement. Contact a licensed septic contractor or installer immediately for inspection.

The Long Island Liquid Waste Association would like to advise homeowners of the following guidelines to avoid the perils of a collapsing block cesspool:

- 1. Know where your septic system is located. Be aware of the area in which all cesspools are located on your property.**
- 2. Take care not to drive or park cars or heavy machinery in or around vicinity of septic system. Heavy weight above or around the cesspool can cause a collapse.**
- 3. Avoid using areas directly above cesspools as common areas of usage (i.e. picnic tables, children's play areas, etc.)**

4. Take notice to any occurrences such as settlement or sinkholes. These are common symptoms indicating a possible collapse. Contact a licensed septic contractor immediately for further investigation.

5. Make every effort to avoid the area of the existing septic system after times of heavy rain, snow, or the first thaw at winter's end. Saturated soils are often the most common periods of cesspool collapse. Block cesspool should also be avoided if they are pumped out. A block cesspool can collapse in the absence of outward pressure within the cesspool. Licensed septic contractors advise homeowners of this potential danger when block cesspools serviced.

6. Consider replacing the block cesspools as soon as possible. Replacing the block cesspools on your property is the only way to eliminate the danger of a collapsing block cesspool.

The Long Island Liquid Waste Association recommends that all homeowners currently residing in homes with block cesspools replace them as soon as possible. Modern septic systems are constructed of precast cement are not susceptible to collapse. Replacement is the only guarantee that the block cesspools will not collapse. However, until the septic system can be replaced, homeowners that know and understand the above warning signs and precautions can live a safer existence with block cesspools beneath their properties.

For further information please contact:

- The Long Island Liquid Waste Assoc. - president@lilwa.org
- The Suffolk County Department of Health - 631-852-2100
- Your respective Town or Village Building Department