Pharmacy FAQ

Septic Tanks and Cancer Treatment

What are the recommendations when a patient who is receiving cancer treatment has a Septic Tank System for home waste treatment?

Septic tanks are watertight, underground containers that are used for processing human waste in the absence of a municipal sewer system. The solid waste settles to the bottom of the tank and becomes "sludge", getting broken down by anaerobic "good" bacteria and eventually getting pumped out as part of regular maintenance. Light materials and oils float on the "scum" or surface layer. Septic tank wastewater from sinks, showers and toilets eventually flows through an effluent filter before reaching the dispersal area. The soil further purifies the wastewater by natural filtration and breakdown by microorganisms before entering the ground water. Maintaining a septic system is important to avoid sewage backups or system failure, leading to repairs or possible contamination of the area around the tank or the ground water.[1,2]

Some medications like antibiotics and chemotherapy may interfere with a septic tank system by killing the "good" bacteria that breakdown waste. Presence in body fluids is determined by many factors including metabolism and excretion characteristics of the medication and the Handling Cancer Drugs and Body Fluids Patient Handout general recommendation is to use precautions for 48 hours after a single dose. As well, the BCG Patient Handout precaution of using bleach to neutralize BCG after BCG instillation can also affect "good" bacteria within the tank.[3,4]

It is recommended that patients receiving chemotherapy or BCG contact their qualified maintenance provider that services their septic tank prior to treatment to discuss the best way to keep their septic system functioning properly. The maintenance provider will make recommendations about how to maintain the "good" bacteria which could include adding beneficial bacteria or having the septic tank pumped more regularly. For example, if the last course of chemotherapy is a set date, then the septic tank can be pumped out shortly after this last treatment. Decreasing the maintenance worker's exposure to hazardous waste should also be considered by the maintenance provider. It is important for patients to follow the specific septic tank system care and usage instructions, such as using environmentally friendly cleaning products, to ensure other stressors to the system are removed.[3]

References:

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