

Wastewater and Coronavirus (COVID-19): What are the risks?

We know that wastewater treatment plant (WWTP) operators and subsurface sewage treatment system (SSTS) maintainers, service providers and installers are commonly exposed to untreated wastewater that contains disease-causing organisms including pathogens (primarily bacteria and viruses) when cleaning out or repairing septic, holding, and pump tanks along with aerobic treatment units. When wastewater professionals are working on a system, workers are unlikely to know which specific disease-causing organisms are in the wastewater, including COVID-19.

Here is what we know to date

1. The World Health Organization WHO has indicated that “there is no evidence to date that COVID-19 virus has been transmitted via sewer systems, with or without wastewater treatment.”
2. Wastewater treatment plants and septic systems treat viruses and other pathogens. COVID-19 is a type of virus that is particularly susceptible to disinfection. Standard treatment and disinfection processes at wastewater treatment plants are expected to be effective. Septic systems use similar processes in conjunction with unsaturated soil to treat pathogens.
3. The U.S. Department of Labor’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) states there is no evidence to suggest that additional, COVID-19 specific protections are needed for employees in wastewater management operations, and OSHA encourages workers to follow routine practices to prevent exposure to wastewater.
4. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) notes that wastewater and sewage workers should use standard practices of basic hygiene precautions (e.g. handwashing) and wear personal protective equipment (PPE) as prescribed for work tasks. In consultation with local health officials, onsite sewage system professionals should consider the following routine disease prevention practices for onsite sewage system tank cleaning, operation and maintenance, and repairs to help protect service providers from potential infection of COVID-19.

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