An introduction to pit latrines

Any discussion of on-site sanitation must start with pit latrines. This is because they are one of the oldest forms of formal sanitation in the world and for many they are still the best. This guide introduces the types of pit latrines that are commonly used in low-income communities and the factors that will help determine which type is most suitable for any given circumstance. Detailed information about particular designs is presented in further guides in this series.

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Guide 24: Latrine excavation and linings
Guide 25: Simple pit latrines
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Guide 27: Ventilated improved pit latrines
Guide 28: Latrine superstructures
Guide 29: Pit latrines used in special circumstances

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The WHO publication *A Guide to the Development of On-site Sanitation* provides more ideas for non-pit latrine options.

**Design details**
Having chosen the latrine that best fits your needs you will need to consider the details. Some features are common to all designs, such as nature of the superstructure (the building which houses the toilet). Other features are particular to individual designs. Note that the WEDC series does not present you with a step-by-step approach to construction, but it does provide you with guidance which will help you build a viable and sustainable latrine.

**Latrine slabs**
Providing sanitation for all is a major global challenge involving many complex issues. The user of a latrine however, will have more local concerns such as the condition of the latrine slab.

Guide 5: Latrine slabs highlights the design, manufacture and maintenance features that help to improve the safety and comfort of users.

**Latrines for emergencies**
There are special considerations to take account of when providing latrines in emergency and disaster situations. For a comprehensive guide, refer to the WEDC publication *Excreta Disposal in Emergencies*.

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**In conclusion**
Pit latrines, in their many forms, are still the most likely sanitary solution for low-income families in both rural and urban areas. Their simplicity and low-cost, and the possibility of improving them incrementally over time makes them an ideal choice.

Design, build and maintain a pit latrine well and it can provide many years of trouble-free service.

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**The advantages of a pit latrine**
Pit latrines have a number of advantages:

- They are simple to build.
- They are easy and safe to use, operate and maintain.
- Local materials and technologies can be used to build them.
- They are versatile and can be constructed to suit a wide range of physical and human environments.
- Designs are easy to copy.
- They are the cheapest technology for the safe disposal of human excreta and can be improved incrementally over time.

So when selecting a form of on-site sanitation for a low-income community, pit latrines should always be the first option to consider as usually one type or another will be the most appropriate choice for most households.

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**What if I can’t find a suitable design?**
Sometimes the environment you are working in is so difficult that none of the options suggested in Figure 1 will be appropriate. Try consulting Guide 29 that covers the design of pit latrines for special situations such as when it is difficult to dig a deep pit or in regions where the climate is very cold.

If you still haven’t found a suitable pit latrine option, after consulting Guide 29, it probably means that some other sanitation choice is more appropriate.
A guide to the selection of a pit latrine

Note: Not all possibilities are illustrated as it is assumed that water availability is related to affordability.