

## **What's in a wipe? The truth about flushable products**

Just because something will physically go down the toilet does not mean it should be flushed. It seems like a simple idea, but the troubles with America's wastewater infrastructure remain in the headlines because too many people flush items down their toilets that weren't meant to be flushed. This is having real impacts on the environment and our local wastewater treatment systems when clogs happen as a result of non-flushable products. To help alleviate the issues, here are some tips on how to know what to flush and what to just throw away.

### **Flushable vs. "flushable"**

It seems a lot of people have confused their toilets with their trash cans, and the proof is at the end of the sewage line.

Only toilet paper, flushable wipes and other products clearly labeled as "flushable" are OK to flush.

Facial tissues, paper towels and feminine products not labeled "flushable" should all go in the garbage, in addition to other kinds of non-flushable wet wipes such as baby wipes, disinfecting wipes, face and hand wipes and household cleaning wipes. These products are intentionally designed to be durable for these tasks and as a result, they are not flushable.

Some people get confused when a product is labeled as disposable, compostable or biodegradable. But these aren't the same as being flushable. The difference is in how the fibers break down (or don't break down) in water over time. Flushable wipes are manufactured using wood pulp fibers and are engineered to lose strength as they move through properly maintained plumbing and sewage systems. And they sink, not float, so are safe in septic systems.

If you're unsure how to dispose of a product, check the "How to Dispose" instructions. If you see the "Do Not Flush" symbol on the packaging, that is a sure sign that a product should not be flushed.

The consumer goods industry has taken proactive steps to ensure flushable wipes work in wastewater systems. The industry, with input from wastewater experts, developed a Flushability Assessment Test that products must pass before they can be labeled "flushable." The assessment uses seven different rigorous tests to ensure products are compatible with wastewater treatment infrastructure.

### **What's really causing issues?**

We know that flushable wipes aren't the problem, so what is? Two studies, one in the UK and one in New York City, took on the messy task of figuring out exactly what is causing issues in wastewater treatment facilities. In both cases, 98 percent of materials contained in sewer systems were garbage, debris and non-flushable wipes. Non-flushable wipes and paper products like paper towels were by far the biggest culprits, making up nearly 91 percent of problem-causing debris. The UK study specifically analyzed a pump clog and found that there was less than 1/10<sup>th</sup> of a percent of flushable wipes, but non-flushable wipes made up 95 percent (by weight) of the material found in the pump clog.

If you're doing the math, you realize that 2 percent of the analyzed materials found were indeed flushable products, but these accumulated after the obstructions and clogs had already formed, just like toilet paper (also found in the blockages and clogs in the studies) and fecal matter tend to do.

### **What to do about it?**

Experts say the key to solving this issue is simple: Stop flushing things that weren't meant to be flushed. Read the packaging on all consumer products and follow the directions on how to properly dispose of them. Wastewater treatment systems can be incredibly effective, but they just weren't designed to handle certain products. By simply following the instructions on the label, consumers can save infrastructure costs.