

Flush Wisely during (and after) Coronavirus

By Linda Golodner, and Chris Wiant, MPH, PhD
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In a nutshell...

To keep household sewage flowing away from our homes for safe treatment and disposal, it is important to “flush wisely.” This article discusses **why you should not flush foreign objects such as disinfectant wipes—even if advertised as safe to flush (they’re not).**

As cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) spike in some areas of the nation, it seems that toilet paper stockpiling (some call it [hoarding](#)) is making an unwelcome return. When toilet paper runs short, many people turn to alternatives such as so-called “flushable” wet wipes. When unsuitable materials are flushed, the results can be both unpleasant and expensive for local wastewater treatment facilities, including clogged sewer lines and broken pumps.

Clogged toilets can overflow into homes resulting in unpleasant cleanups, property destruction, and unsafe hygienic conditions. If the blockages occur further “downstream,” they can lead to sewage back-ups and overflows into nearby homes, parks, yards, and local streams. “Being self-quarantined at home during the pandemic can be tough,” said Walter E. Marlowe, executive director of the Water Environment Federation ([WEF](#)). “Being self-quarantined at home with a backed-up sewer is much, much worse. Do not flush things that should not be flushed.” How true.

Not a New Problem

Problems with “flushing non-flushables” likely extend back to the invention of toilets. But these concerns get far worse, more costly, and increased attention whenever there is a sustained shortage of toilet paper. To make matters worse, home-bound Americans are stepping-up efforts to sanitize their dwellings with disinfecting wipes that were never intended to be flushed. All too often these go down the toilet. There are also increasing reports of [disposable gloves and masks](#) finding their way into storm and wastewater systems. This happens as more and more people leave their houses and enter public spaces while wearing personal protective equipment (a good practice), but all too often discard them on parking lots and sidewalks. Similar to improperly disposing of fats, oil, and grease (or “[FOG](#)”) down kitchen sinks, flushed



Photo credit: [City of Portland, OR](#)



Improperly discarded disposable glove

foreign objects, ranging from makeup remover and baby wipes to tampons and condoms, can clog pipes and pumps until the sewer system becomes blocked and overflows.

Do Not Flush Wipes!

Whether or not wipes advertised as safe to flush are, in fact, flushable, can be a [topic of debate](#). It turns out that wet wipes are made of wood pulp and are often strengthened with synthetic fibers, including plastic.



**Wipes labeled
"flushable" make
pipes look like this.**

Photo credit: U.S. Army

If you have ever wondered what distinguishes a flushable from a non-flushable wipe, the answer is—not much, according to [a laboratory analysis of wipes](#) collected from around the world. Flushable and non-flushable wipes were found to be similar in terms of thickness, volume, weight, and how they reacted to moisture. The Turkish researchers concluded that there was an “absence of any technical basis that separates flushable wipes clearly from non-flushables.” Closer to home, [North Carolina recently passed legislation](#) requiring prominent “do not flush” labeling for disposable wipes to help guide consumers to dispose of them appropriately in the trash.

Stick with the “Three P’s”

At this point, you can probably guess what **should** go down the toilet. According to WEF, only the three P’s belong in the toilet: pee, poop, and toilet paper. Period. Disposing of anything else in the toilet,

including wet wipes labeled as flushable, is “bad news for the pipes and pumps.” Because human waste is transported, treated, and disinfected (often using chlorine) at centralized sewage facilities, it is more important than ever to [protect the health of U.S. wastewater workers](#). You can help them by sticking with the “three P’s” to keep sewage pipes flowing and pumps pumping 24/7. The less they have to “unclog,” the safer they are!

And one final note, to protect you and your family, **close the lid—if possible—before flushing**. This helps prevent the [expulsion of tiny water droplets](#) into the air that could contain bacteria and viruses from feces, as well as urine and vomit, which can spread disease. Yuck!

Flush Wisely

As we all continue to adapt to life and work during the pandemic, a few things don’t change. We all still need to eat, drink, and use the toilet. (And don’t forget to [wash your hands properly and frequently](#).) One thing we can all do to keep our sewage flowing the right way, from our homes to local wastewater treatment plants, is to flush wisely. You can help do your part by not flushing wipes.

Linda F. Golodner is President Emeritus of the National Consumers League and Vice Chair of the Water Quality & Health Council (WQ&HC). Chris Wiant, MPH, PhD, is Chair of the WQ&HC and recently retired as the founding president and CEO of the Caring for Colorado Foundation. He is also a former member of the National Drinking Water Advisory Council.

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