

Wipes in the pipes snarling sewers

Kirsti Marohn, USA TODAY 7:57 a.m. EDT July 17, 2013



Jon Forsell, utilities superintendent for Avon, Minn., shows some of the debris containing disinfectant wipes that they've had to pull out of the city's sewer lift station pumps. (Photo: Kimm Anderson, St. Cloud Times)

Story Highlights

- Companies such as Cottonelle and Charmin have heavily promoted bathroom wipes
- Cloth-like material doesn't break down in the sanitary sewer system like toilet paper
- Public works managers say the problem has worsened in recent years

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ST. CLOUD, Minn. -- They are touted as disposable and even flushable, but disinfecting wipes are causing headaches for operators of city sewer systems.

The products appeal to consumers in part because of manufacturers' claims that they can be conveniently flushed down the toilet. But their cloth-like material doesn't break down in the sanitary sewer system like toilet paper and can block sewer lines, clog equipment and increase cities' maintenance and repair costs.

Public works managers say the problem has worsened in recent years because more such products are available on the market and consumer demand for antibacterial products is growing.

Companies such as Cottonelle and Charmin have heavily promoted bathroom wipes, while some cleaning product manufacturers have advertised sponges that can be disposed of in the toilet.

"It's getting to be more and more of a problem," says Marty Sunderman, superintendent for the city of Sauk Centre, Minn. This spring, the city had to hire a contractor to vacuum out a lift station to remove a truckload of cloth material.

"Ideally, what we'd like to see flushed down the system is just toilet paper," Sunderman says. "When you put these type of rags down there, they don't come apart. They just stay with it all the way to the pumps."

The same problem is happening "all over the country," says Cynthia Finley, director of regulatory affairs for the National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA) .

"Consumers are being told by the packaging that these things are flushable," Finley says. Although the material might make it through the toilet and the pipes leading away from the house, they tend to clog up once in the sewer system, she says.

"That can cause huge headaches for the utilities," Finley says.

Elsewhere:

- In Raleigh, N.C., the biggest sources of sewer overflows and backups are rags and debris, mostly flushable wipes, says Marti Gibson, the city's environmental coordinator for wastewater. A Raleigh ordinance prohibits flushing anything except human waste, toilet paper and water, Gibson says.

"We aren't saying don't use them," Gibson says. "Just throw them in the trash can."

- In Grand Rapids, Mich., wipes get hung up on pumps and in pipes, says Mike Lunn, environmental services manager. City officials have focused on public education and sent a mailing to residents that urged "no wipes in the pipes," but the problems continue, Lunn says.

- Boise took minor enforcement action against a local medical clinic that appeared to be the source of a towel-like material in the sewer main, says Walt Baumgartner, environmental coordinator with the public works department. The city is trying to take early action before major problems occur, he says.

A spokesman for Kimberly-Clark, which makes Cottonelle flushable cleansing cloths, says the product is designed to be flushed. They undergo extensive testing to ensure they are compatible with home and city sewer systems, Bob Brand said in an e-mail.

However, *Consumer Reports* tested several brands of wipes labeled flushable and found that while toilet paper disintegrated after about eight seconds, the wipes still hadn't broken down after 30 minutes.

The Association of the Nonwoven Fabrics Industry says its products aren't the problem. Researchers have collected and analyzed materials from wastewater pumps and found that most aren't items labeled flushable, but are baby wipes, hard-surface wipes or other non-flushable items, spokesman Phil Pitt says.

The association is developing flushability guidelines and a "Do Not Flush" logo for products, Pitt said.

NACWA is trying to educate the public and encourage companies to change their marketing. Most utilities want the "flushable" label removed from packaging, Finley says. On some products such as baby wipes that carry a warning not to flush them, utilities want the message featured more prominently.

However, progress is slow because the standards are voluntary, Finley says. Some cities have begun putting a notice in newsletters that are mailed to residents along with their water bill, advising them to avoid flushing those items.

Pat Shea, public services director in St. Cloud, Minn., says many residents aren't even aware of the issue.

"They just think once it's out the door, it's fine," Shea says. "It's usually just a matter of education. People don't know it's causing problems."

Marohn also reports for the *St. Cloud (Minn.) Times*