What NOT to Flush or Dump into a Municipal Sewer System

Contrary to manufacturer's labels and other misleading information that you may read online, not everything can go down a drain, be flushed down a toilet, or dumped into storm drains.

Municipal wastewater treatment plants operate by maintaining a healthy environment to grow bacteria that break down the waste into biosolids that can be used for fertilizer, and clean water that is discharged into receiving streams (such as rivers or lakes) or it may be filtered to go to groundwater. If the wastewater coming into the treatment plant is high in certain contaminants that are listed below, it costs more to remove them, thus costing taxpayers more money. If toxic material is sent to a treatment plant, it may completely kill the plant, sending the contaminants directly into the receiving streams to harm wildlife, plants, fish, and other aquatic life. Some items cause physical blockage or damage to pipes, pumps, and other equipment, also costing the city money. Some contaminants, such as pharmaceuticals, cannot be removed at all by most municipal wastewater systems, and go directly into groundwater or receiving water, causing extensive environmental damage.

If you don't want to see a rise in your water or sewer charges, take care in what you put down your drain. Human waste, shower and bath water, and most food waste from garbage disposals is acceptable, but be aware of anything else that should instead go into the garbage, compost bin, or hazardous waste site. It's important to remember that a toilet is not a replacement for your garbage can. Protect your plumbing, your local waste treatment plant, and your rivers and lakes by following these guidelines, and when in doubt, throw it in your trash rather than flushing. The following items should never be disposed of into a sewer system or storm drains:

Grease- This includes cooked/melted fat from meat, poultry, sausage, bacon, as well as gravy. Also note that this will include dairy products such as cheese, ice cream, milk, and butter. Grease clogs pipes, pumps, and other equipment in sewers and wastewater treatment plants. It does not break down easily and can cost cities thousands of dollars to unclog, clean, and remove. Many cities now have grease dumpsters where you can dispose of it. If you are a commercial establishment or other entity such as a school or nursing home with kitchens and grease traps, have a hauler physically remove the grease on a frequent basis. Do not use degreasers, as these only temporarily liquidize it, and it hardens back up in pipes to cause major clogs.

Cooking oil – This oil mixes very easily with all other waste and contributes greatly towards creating drain blockage. Along with grease and all fats, cooking oil contributes nearly fifty percent of over thirty thousand sewer overflows across the United States each year. Don't forget that salad dressings and mayonnaise are also oils that should not be discarded down drains.

Motor oil – Always keep oil, transmission fluids and all other chemicals (including anti-freeze) far away from drains. This includes household and storm drains. This will help greatly in protecting the health of wastewater plants, lakes, rivers, and streams.

Gasoline – Any benzene product such as gasoline is not only an explosion hazard in sewers, but a serious health hazard for workers. It is also harmful to the microbiology in wastewater facilities and may go on through the treatment plants to the receiving streams, harming fish and other aquatic life.

Flushable Wipes – These are NOT FLUSHABLE no matter what the labeling states. Wet wipes contain congealed grease and will not disintegrate like toilet paper does. Damaging or harming wastewater treatment centers, it also contributes towards increased expenditure of cities' budgets. Removal of wipes from pumps and other equipment is one of the biggest maintenance expenditures for municipal plants.

All Paper Towels – While they may be biodegradable, they still absorb moisture and will clog drainage pipes.

Women's Sanitary Products – Absorbing moisture, they also have a tendency to expand. And, of course, it contains human bodily fluids. The tampon plastic applicators must be removed by wastewater treatment plants and can cause plugging and damage to pumps. If the treatment plant does not have adequate solids removal, the plastic and other products can end up in receiving waters or biosolids that are hauled to farm fields.

Cleaning Solutions – The contents of these solutions are usually antibacterial agents, phosphates, ammonia, and other environmentally harmful compounds that kill the microbes that break down the waste in wastewater treatment plants. Wisconsin facilities also must meet strict DNR discharge criteria for ammonia and phosphorus as they are harmful to aquatic environments. Most cleaners with phosphorus ingredients have been banned in our state since 1990, although they are available on the internet and in other forms (see TSP). Quaternary ammonia, an extremely antimicrobic form of ammonia, is now common in cleaning products, so a little goes a long way. Read and follow labels for amounts to be used if mixing products with water.

TSP (Tri-sodium phosphate) – TSP is a strong solvent that contains high levels of phosphorus. As stated above, phosphorus cleaners should not enter sewers or storm drains.

Paint – Paints should never be disposed of down a drain or storm drain, as they contain hazardous substances. Oil based paints and solvents are especially harmful to wastewater facilities, but latex paints are also a problem. Dispose of paint solutions at hazardous waste facilities or during hazardous waste cleanup days in your community.

Medicine – Pharmaceuticals are especially harmful to fish and aquatic life. Wastewater treatment plants cannot remove pharmaceuticals, and studies show that the nation's streams and rivers carry high levels of drugs such as anti-depressants, pain killers, birth control drugs, and others that affect fish health and populations. Drop off all unused/expired medicines at local pharmacies which should, by now, have access to chemical/medical waste disposal units or during a local take-back program which all citizens are encouraged to use.

Hypodermic needles – Needles can carry very harmful pathogens that expose wastewater operators to disease and may cause tetanus from cuts. Dispose of needles in proper dispensaries at medical facilities or other designated areas, never in trash, toilets or storm drains.

Solvents – These, along with most cleaning solutions, paint & oil, fall under the classification of toxic and harmful chemicals. If disposed of down drains, these will kill off wastewater treatment plants, and may enter lakes, rivers, groundwater, and oceans causing harm to the vulnerable ecosystems of these areas.

Animal Feces – Not only will it clog drains, but it will also attract harmful bacteria and vermin. It also should be noted that 'flushable' cat litter should never be discarded down drains. Not only will litter absorb water and clog pipes but it may contain harmful parasites. Always bag and dispose of cat litter and waste in the trash.

Condoms – These are usually not made of latex and will not disintegrate in water. It is best to dispose of these at waste management centers because of the content of human fluids. Flushed down toilets, they make their way to wastewater treatment plants, where they must be physically removed, or they will end up in the receiving waters, harming fish and wildlife.

Dental Floss- Dental floss does not break down in water and is often not adequately removed with solids removal equipment at wastewater plants. This can cause damage and plugging in pipes and other equipment.

Hair – Similarly to the effects of dental floss, sending hair down the drain can cause larger problems later on. Hair tends to stick to the inside of pipes, leading to build-up and clogs over time. Don't flush large clumps of hair down the toilet, and use drain covers to protect your shower and sink drains.

Coffee Grounds – Coffee grounds are one of the worst offenders in causing drain blockages. So, before rinsing and washing cups/mugs/coffeemakers, dispose of grounds in the garbage. Coffee grounds (and eggshells) are great for composting.

Eggshells – Eggshells do not break down in water and may also cause clogging of pipes. They contribute to the granular inorganic material that must be physically removed from wastewater prior to disposal, which is an additional cost to the wastewater system.