

# Flushable wipes can wipe out your sewer system

By Debbi Sellers

Over the past decade, the use of flushable wipes has steadily increased in the U.S. More and more companies have been manufacturing these disposable wipes, with marketing claims that the wipes are safe for septic and sewer systems. Unfortunately, the truth is, the majority of these “flushable” wipes don’t break down or dissolve when flushed down the toilet. Instead, they bind together in sewer lines, create blockages and cause damage to pumps and equipment.

With the Governor’s recent stay at home order, to help slow the spread of COVID-19, there are significantly more people quarantined in their homes. People are using anything and everything to clean and disinfect, including baby wipes, paper towels, disinfecting cloths and flushable wipes. However, most urban sewage systems depend on gravity and water flow to move toilet paper and waste. These systems were not designed to accommodate the other products that people are flushing down the toilet, which do not break down as easily and clog the system. This in turn can result in backups and overflows in homes and wastewater treatment facilities, creating an additional public health risk in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While finding these items in sewer systems is not a new risk for our members, there has been an increase in call outs for Public Works staff to clear these clogs and rags from sewer lines and pumps. Plumbers are also being called out to an increasing number of homes to jet lateral lines from the home to the sewer main, where many of these wads of products get stuck.

Governor Jay Inslee recently signed a bill which requires packaging for wipes to clearly display “do not flush” on the labeling. It is the first state bill of this nature to be passed in the country but does not go into effect until in 2022. While this may help reduce the number of “flushable wipes” in the sewer system in the future, members need to take action now to manage this risk.

## Communicate:

Members should use all means available to communicate the potential problems and damage that can be caused by flushing any kind of wipes, paper towels, or any other items other than toilet paper. Members should place warnings on websites, social media accounts, in community newspapers, utility bills, on door hangers and with placement of temporary signage throughout neighborhoods. The use of photos and picture signage can help communicate the message. In addition, these communications should also be in other languages to meet the needs of each community. Finally, communication should be ongoing and updated to ensure your message isn’t forgotten.

Inform:

Property owners and tenants need to be informed that, other than toilet paper, products like flushable wipes do not break down and dissolve in the sewer system.

Notify the public that flushable or disinfecting wipes, paper towels, or any other items should be put in the garbage and not flushed down the toilet. Members should emphasize that these items, if flushed, can create a clog, not only in the member's sewer main and pumps, but also in the property owner's lateral line, which can lead to sewage back-ups into the home. In addition, warning property owners that continued use of these products could result in an increase in utility fees and bills is recommended.

Regulate:

Finally, members should use their municipal code or other regulatory legislation to restrict the disposal of anything, other than toilet paper, into the sewage system. The regulations should also clearly state that cost to remove clogs from the lateral line or any resulting sewage back-up, will be the homeowner's responsibility.

Your assigned WCIA Risk Management Representative would be happy to assist you with any questions you may have.