

RRWA Environmental Column – January 2012

Your toilet is not a trash can.

With all the Holiday hustle and bustle and getting ready for company, we sometimes hurry and throw items into the toilet other than toilet paper. Remember the only truly flushable paper product is toilet paper. Other products might say they're flushable, but they are not.

Our sewers are designed to dispose of very specific things. The drains that connect your home to the main sewer are only big enough to carry water, toilet paper and human waste. Just because the package says "flushable" or "septic safe" doesn't mean it's true. Currently, there is no state or federal standard for flush-ability, and tests have shown that "flushable" wipes do not degrade readily like toilet paper. Many municipalities around the state are experiencing serious problems with "flushable" products within their sewer systems. Using your toilet for disposal of many modern products will often result in sewer system blockages which can lead to the sewer overflowing – a condition none of us want!

Paper towels and toilet paper are both made of paper, and both deteriorate in the presence of moisture. The difference is in the quality of wood pulp that is used to create the paper fibers. Toilet tissue will degrade much faster than paper towels, and is much less resistant to tearing than paper towels. Flushed paper towels and other modern cleaning products will accumulate in your pipes and could get caught on tree roots, which are often present in older sewer lines. This could result in an unnecessary and costly visit from your local plumber.

THESE ITEMS SHOULD NEVER BE FLUSHED:

- Diapers (cloth, disposable, "flushable")
- Baby wipes and facial cloths
- Toilet bowl scrub pads
- Disposable mops
- Sanitary napkins, tampons, condoms, or any non-organic material
- Paper towels and napkins
- Cotton swabs, cotton balls and bandages
- Dental floss

So what can I do? Avoid purchasing "flushable" items. Clean with a sponge or a rag that you can reuse. All of the items listed above should be disposed of in the garbage. If such items are a must for your family, we recommend tossing them out with the trash.

This article was authored by Lauren McPhaul, Water and Sewer Project Coordinator for the City of Ukiah, on behalf of RRWA. RRWA (www.rwatershed.org) is an association of local public agencies in the Russian River Watershed that have come together to coordinate regional programs for clean water, fisheries restoration, and watershed enhancement.