

Epidemic of wipes and masks plagues sewers, storm drains

June 4 2020, by Claudia Lauer and John Flesher



In this Monday, May 25, 2020 photo a person walks past a storm drain with discarded gloves and other trash in Philadelphia. Between mid-March, when the city's stay-at-home order was issued, and the end of April, most of the 19 sewer and storm water pumping stations in Philadelphia had experienced clogs from face masks, gloves and wipes residents had pitched into the potty, Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney said.(AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

Mayor Jim Kenney kicked off a recent briefing on Philadelphia's coronavirus response with an unusual request for residents: Be careful what you flush.

Between mid-March, when the city's stay-at-home order was issued, and the end of April, most of the 19 sewer and storm water pumping stations in Philadelphia had experienced clogs from face masks, gloves and wipes residents had pitched into the potty, Kenney [said](#).

"Please do not flush any of these items down the toilet," the mayor said.

Officials in other U.S. cities and rural communities—and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency—have issued similar pleas as wastewater plant operators report a surge of stopped-up pipes and damage to equipment.

The problem has sharpened the longstanding clash over whether wipes are suitable for flushing.

While drain clogs aren't new, most of the more than 15 cities contacted by The Associated Press said they've become a more costly and time consuming headache during the pandemic. Home-bound Americans are seeking alternatives to bathroom tissue because of occasional shortages, while stepping up efforts to sanitize their dwellings and themselves.

"When everyone rushed out to get toilet paper and there was none ... people were using whatever they could," said Pamela Mooring, spokeswoman for DC Water, the system in the nation's capital.



This Friday, May 22, 2020 photo shows a discarded glove on a storm drain in Philadelphia. Between mid-March, when the city's stay-at-home order was issued, and the end of April, most of the 19 sewer and storm water pumping stations in Philadelphia had experienced clogs from face masks, gloves and wipes residents had pitched into the potty, Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney said. (AP Photo/Jonathan Poet)

Sanitary sewer overflows jumped 33% between February and March in Houston because of clogs from rags, tissues, paper towels and wipes, said public works department spokeswoman Erin Jones.

In Murfreesboro, Tennessee, crews are cleaning sewage pumping

stations a couple of times a week that previously needed it once a month, said John Strickland, manager of the treatment facility.

At Beale Air Force Base in Northern California, a squadron that usually deals with airfield maintenance and weaponry disposal has been yanking wipes from the base's plumbing.

"Our airmen are working 16-plus hours to unclog the pipe systems and that takes them out of the mission and puts a strain on the rest of the team," Master Sgt. Destrey Robbins said in an article on the Beale [website](#).

By flushing the wrong things, people are taxing infrastructure that's already deteriorating, said Darren Olson, vice chairman of the American Society of Civil Engineers' Committee for America's Infrastructure.

"Your latex glove may not be the thing that causes a clog, but you are adding to the burden."

Hundreds of areas, like a portion of Philadelphia, have combined sewage and stormwater systems so sanitation officials say that means discarded masks and gloves that litter sidewalks and parking lots can also reach and help gum up treatment plants.



This Monday, May 25, 2020 photo shows a discarded glove on a storm drain in Philadelphia. Between mid-March, when the city's stay-at-home order was issued, and the end of April, most of the 19 sewer and storm water pumping stations in Philadelphia had experienced clogs from face masks, gloves and wipes residents had pitched into the potty, Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney said. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

Olson said masks and gloves thrown in the street can travel through storm drains in separate systems to lakes and other waterways.

George Leonard, Ocean Conservancy's chief scientist, said he's concerned discarded personal protective equipment could wash out to sea and eventually add to "the plastics burden that the ocean is already suffering from."

Costs of clearing, cleaning and restarting equipment are mounting for utilities.

To reduce the likelihood of clogs, WSSC Water—a wastewater utility that serves nearly 1.8 million customers in Prince George's and Montgomery counties in Maryland—installed about 27 debris grinding pumps over the last decade at a cost of \$1.5 million.

"At one wastewater pumping station alone, one that does not have grinder pumps, we have seen an increase of 37,000 pounds of wipes during January–March 2020 compared with the same time period in 2019," said utility spokeswoman Lyn Riggins.

Michigan's Macomb County spent \$50,000 in 2018 removing a "fatberg" of debris, oils and grease that was 100 feet long and 11 feet wide, said Candice Miller, public works commissioner. The suburban Detroit community also spent millions to install screens that snag thousands of pounds of wipes weekly.



In this May 28, 2020, file photo Lyn Riggins, WSSC Water spokesperson, holds up a wipe that was collected along with other debris at a pumping station in Washington. Sewer systems are battling the "wipe monster" from all the wipes and other debris since pandemic that are clogging up pumping stations. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

Municipal officials say the solution's simple: Put nothing in toilets but human waste and toilet paper.

"Don't be fooled by wipes packaging claims that these products are flushable," DC Water said in a March [advisory](#). "They are not."

The Association of the Nonwoven Fabrics Industry, which represents hundreds of companies including major wipes producers, agrees most

wet wipes are unsuitable for toilet disposal and says they're labeled as such.

But one type is designed to perform the same functions as toilet paper and merits the "flushable" label, said Dave Rouse, president of the industry group.

These cellulose wipes begin breaking down immediately and dissolve within hours, Rouse said.

"These wipes are incapable of causing the kinds of problems that wastewater operators are accusing them of," he said.



In this May 28, 2020, file photo Lyn Riggins, WSSC Water spokesperson, holds up a wipe that was collected along with other debris at a pumping station in

Washington. Sewer systems are battling the "wipe monster" from all the wipes and other debris since pandemic that are clogging up pumping stations. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)



This Monday, May 25, 2020 photo shows a discarded glove on a storm drain in Philadelphia. Between mid-March, when the city's stay-at-home order was issued, and the end of April, most of the 19 sewer and storm water pumping stations in Philadelphia had experienced clogs from face masks, gloves and wipes residents had pitched into the potty, Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney said. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

Critics contend "flushable" wipes don't biodegrade as manufacturers

claim.

In Macomb County outside Detroit, maintenance workers are removing two tons of wipes per week from one pump station, and officials say some clearly are the "flushable" variety.

This month, the county sued wipe manufacturers, alleging voluntary flushability standards are based on testing that doesn't reflect actual conditions in a sewer system.

In March, Washington became the first state to adopt requirements for the size, placement and visibility of "Do Not Flush" warnings on wipes that manufacturers and local officials agree should not go down toilets. Similar legislation is under consideration in California.

Meanwhile, many cities are using public education campaigns to make their case against flushing pandemic debris.

The [message](#) may be getting through, says El Paso, Texas water utility spokesman Carlos Briano. Before the media blitz, emergency maintenance teams were dispatched about seven times a day to clear pipes. Now, it's once a day.

"It's slowed, but it's still not pre-pandemic," Briano said.

© 2020 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: Epidemic of wipes and masks plagues sewers, storm drains (2020, June 4) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-06-epidemic-masks-plague-sewers-storm.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is

provided for information purposes only.