

Flushable vs Biodegradable



So, what does flushable mean? Flushable means suitable for disposal by flushing down a toilet – according to Webster's. I think this general definition is pretty accurate, if not a little vague. This brings up a pretty funny story. Back in 2005, my son was 3+ years old. He was utterly fascinated with the toilet as it could make things disappear. Suffice it to say that many items are in fact "flushable" – five of my sister's toothbrushes were "flushable," silk flowers are "flushable," Matchbox cars are definitely "flushable," as is the green foam in the bottom of a fake flower arrangement. Still, this one will require you to remove the toilet and take it out into the driveway to pour acid and water through to remove the stuck pieces.

All in all, we purchased three new toilets over three years because of breakage from trying to snake any number of things out of the line, not to mention a dozen wax rings to reseat the toilet that had to be removed to dislodge whatever "flushable" item had been placed in there. Now, let's fast forward a bit - we all remember the events of 2020 - and one event that will remain a constant source of PTSD for most of us was the lack of toilet paper. In tough times we must all make choices. This was one of those times. Many of us ended up using whatever we could find to be suitable, and rightly so, but there is a consequence with every choice.

In this case, the consequence was more and more frequent sewage spills caused by blockages in lines - blockages from "flushable" wipes, coffee filters, paper towels, and rags. So let's go back to Webster's definition of "flushable." Sure, I know many things can be disposed of by flushing them down a toilet, but is that the end of it? Is it really disposed of, and you are home free? It turns out the answer is NO!

When we think that we have successfully disposed of something by sending it down our commodes, we are just moving it to another location to hang out for a bit. Like all those toothbrushes or Matchbox cars, they weren't really gone; they were just out of sight. Now, how long those things hang out or how far they remain out of view depends on a few factors. First, does the object break down in the water? Second, how much does it weigh? And third, can it "catch" on something or have other things "catch" on it? We will take all good points one at a time to consider.

First, does the object break down in the water? Matchbox cars and toothbrushes most definitely do not break down in the water, trust me. As for "flushable" wipes, a Canadian study tested 23 different "flushable" wipes and found that only two even partially broke down, and none of them entirely broke down. In New York, the Department of Environmental Protection tested 28 wipes against the flushability guidelines set by the International Water Services Flushability Group (IWSFG) and found that none of the 28 brands broke down in the water. Even though there are a couple of flushability tests out there – there is currently no requirement for any brand to test their wipes for flushability before labeling the package as "flushable." Now, remember the Webster's definition we talked about earlier? This is where "vague" becomes important. As we now know, many things can go down the toilet, but what happens then?

How much does it weigh? Wipes and toilet paper weigh almost nothing and move pretty easily in water – provided there is enough water to do more than making it wet. Then, can it catch on something or have other things catch on it? As a matter of information, let's all agree that plumbing and piping are not perfectly smooth surfaces. There are burrs and picks in any line that can snag materials, notably softer materials. Once this happens, it is easy for grease, food particles, or other "flushable" items to catch on them and form a stopper of sorts. Once this happens, it's only a matter of time before the blockage forms and begins to back up. And to where does it back up? Well, if the snag happens in a service line, the blockage can redecorate your bathroom, or kitchen, or basement, basically wherever there is a drain or toilet. These types of blockages are the homeowner's responsibility since the service line is their private property. If the blockage happens in a main, which is typically located in the street, then it is the responsibility of the sewer provider. This has the potential to fertilize the surrounding area with high-quality domestic waste (sewage) from the general area, meaning your house and your neighbor's house, and some stores just outside of your subdivision that make pizzas or provide laundry facilities. Since this is a sewer main, it likely contains sewage from several surrounding areas and the homeowners. This will need immediate repair, cleaning, and monitoring for 12 months if the sewage reaches a creek or stream.

The moral of the story is never leave a toddler unsupervised in a bathroom even for a minute (they do their own flushability tests), and think a little more about what a word actually means. Just because it can go down a toilet doesn't mean it won't cause you or your service provider serious money to fix. But don't take my word for it, do your own research. Get three clear glasses, put toilet paper in one, paper towel in one, and "flushable" wipes in one (face wipe, baby wipe, etc.), fill them with water and stir with a fork for 15 seconds every minute or so for about 15 to 20 minutes. Take pictures of your setup and information and email them to us at ccwsaea@gmail.com – we would love to see your results. You can also try this with Matchbox cars and toothbrushes, but that will be a long wait! —Jennifer Arp, Environmental Affairs Department Assistant Manager



*Just as a reminder, if you have a particular topic or question you would like us to address, please send it to ccwsaea@gmail.com.