



# Wiping Out the Problem: Flushable Items in Sanitary Sewer Systems

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**A** major problem has been rearing its ugly head across the United States and worldwide—“flushable” items in sanitary sewer systems. These products are marketed as flushable, disposable, biodegradable and environmentally friendly, but they are causing major issues and costly maintenance bills for the treatment plant. These items may eventually break down over time, but sometimes we fail to consider how long it takes them to biodegrade.

The topic that is at the forefront in the wastewater treatment business is the overuse of wet-wipes, or baby wipes, which are being flushed into the sanitary sewer systems. Yes, they do go down the drain and may even make it through the piping system, but what happens after that? I'll tell you what—a major environmental and labor problem.

I have been in the water treatment business for thirty years, and up until the past 15 years, the main use of wet-wipes was cleaning up after babies during diaper changes, and they were disposed of with the diaper in the waste basket and ultimately ended up in the landfill. That is where they belong. However, this has changed in recent years, and the products are being marketed toward adults for everyday use.

I visit with rural water utilities on a daily basis and have an intimate knowledge of the challenges they face both operationally and financially. The flushing of these products is causing a major problem for the treatment systems. The influx of these wipes causes equipment at the treatment plant to not work as efficiently, which also causes the plant to expend more energy. In some cases, it has even caused equipment failure, which is even more costly. All these issues put the treatment process at risk.

Additionally, it affects the personnel responsible for the sewer collection and treatment systems. Work hours escalate due to having to pull pumps to unclog them, clean out clogged sewer lines and prevent the

refuse from entering the treatment plant. I personally could name at least a dozen systems that routinely pull their pumps each Friday just to prevent the staff being called out on weekends. That is unreasonable and expensive, not to mention unfair to the staff we rely on to keep us safe. On the environmental side, these wipes do not just go away—they have to be contained and disposed of properly. This results in more manpower expended, which means more cost for the system.

I have a challenge for each system reading this article. Please put a notice out to your consumers, whether it be with your utility bill, in a newsletter, on social media, in TRWA's consumer magazine, etc. This situation affects us all, so we need to do our part in educating the customers and making them aware that the cost of wastewater treatment will continue to go up unless they do their part. Try to appeal to the importance of protecting the environment and protecting their pocketbook. It is not flush and forget—it could be flush and regret!



Keep our systems flowing efficiently by keeping your customers informed and wipes, paper towels and plastics out of sewer systems. Take care, and thanks for all you do for your customers and the quality of our greatest asset: Water! If you have questions about this article, you may reach me at [alex.eaves@trwa.org](mailto:alex.eaves@trwa.org) or by calling 512-964-7203.