

What is: “Flushable?”



TOILETS ARE NOT TRASHCANS™

When you flush your toilet or pour something down the drain of your sink or tub, what you send away disappears from sight and mind. But it’s only begun its journey to the CCMUA’s wastewater treatment plant in Camden, and beyond. If it’s a harmful chemical, it may disrupt the treatment process, or some of it may not be removed, and will pass through into the Delaware River. If it’s a solid, greasy, or sticky material that isn’t designed to pass through the sewer system, it may not even make it to the plant. That can result in a clog somewhere along the line, and back sewage up into the streets, into your house, or into streets and homes in neighborhoods miles away elsewhere in the county as it travels toward the treatment plant. Clogs from these materials can also happen at the plant itself, creating problems for the whole system.

By giving a little thought to what goes down the toilet and drain, and by disposing of materials properly, you can save yourself from some repair bills; save the environment from unnecessary pollutants; and reduce potential damage to the public wastewater treatment system whose costs end up being charged back to the users—including you.

Just because you can do something doesn’t mean that you should do it. You could claim that anything that fits through the hole at the bottom of the toilet bowl is “flushable,” technically. Parents of young children may have experienced keys, golf balls, toys, or clothing go down. But that doesn’t mean they’re going to be carried through the complicated network of pipes (potentially many miles) until they reach the wastewater treatment plant at the end of the line. Toilet paper is manufactured to disintegrate quickly in water. Paper tissues and towels, sanitary products, and diapers are not. Material can get caught at a sharp turn, or snag on the pipe lining, or tangle with other debris and make a bigger mess that impedes the flow in the pipe and cause partial or complete blockage and backups. The problems can be even bigger as material tries to pass through pumps or other machinery in its travels, and it stops or even damages equipment. Even material that starts out as liquid fats, oils, and greases (“FOG” in the industry lingo) can solidify and clog up the system.

So just because something can disappear down the toilet with a flush, that doesn’t mean you should put it there.

These days, the biggest offender is personal hygiene materials advertised as **“flushable” baby or adult wipes**. Sure, it’s physically possible to flush them down and out of sight, but once sent on their way through the sewers, “flushable” wipes can do a tremendous amount of damage! Rather than disintegrate, they manage to attach to other material and grow into agglomerations that the sewer systems are not designed to handle. You may have seen the headlines from London over the last few years, where what they call “fatbergs” of fat, wipes, waste, and other items were cleaned out of the London sewer system. The separate instances were described as “the size of a bus,” “the size of a 747,” and “40-metre long fatberg.” The problem has been covered by the New York Times, Washington Post,

the major media networks, and the major national wastewater treatment organizations have instituted campaigns to raise awareness of this real problem. The general rule to follow is **“don’t flush any personal hygiene products other than toilet paper.”**

Drugs and Medications

The US Food and Drug Administration states that disposal by flushing down the toilet is not advised for most drugs because of concerns that trace amounts of drugs can end up in the water supply and in rivers and lakes. That means potentially into the food chain, and ultimately into you and me. Not only humans can be affected. For example, a recent study found that fish whose brains held trace amounts of human anti-anxiety drugs were less effective at seeking shelter from predators. Antibiotic waste, which is associated with antibiotic-resistant bacteria, is also a problem in the wild. The best solution is to bring unwanted pharmaceuticals to a designated drug collection drop off point. Alternatively, you may discard some drugs in household trash after first making them difficult to recover by children, pets, or others seeking drugs. You can do this by first mixing pills or tablets with coffee grounds, kitty litter, dirt, or sawdust, then placing them in a non-leaking container such as a sealable plastic bag before placing them in the regular trash. But they may eventually land up in a landfill and return to the environment anyway. So it’s best to bring them to bring the unwanted drugs to an approved collection point.

New Jersey’s **Project Medicine Drop Program (800-242-5846)** has placed secured drop boxes in the headquarters of local police departments. Consumers from anywhere in New Jersey can visit these boxes seven days a week, to drop off unneeded and expired medications and keep them away from those at risk of abusing them. See www.njconsumeraffairs.gov/meddrop.

The Camden County Board of Freeholders’ **Addiction Awareness Task Force** aims to provide a safe, convenient, and responsible means of disposing of prescription drugs. No longer needed or outdated prescription drugs in homes are the same drugs that have unfortunately become the target of theft and misuse, oftentimes by people who have access to the residence. America’s 12 to 17 year olds have made prescription drugs the number one substance of abuse for their age group, and much of that supply is coming from the medicine cabinets of their parents, grandparents, and friends. Help us end medicine abuse by disposing of unneeded prescription drugs at a drug drop box near you. The web site lists local police departments that provide drop boxes for unneeded or expired drugs:

www.addictions.camdencounty.com

More information

To learn more about the problem, visit the CCMUA’s education web page: www.CCMUA.org

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