

Flushable Wipes: 9 Myths vs. Facts

Myth #1: Flushable wipes are the biggest culprit in clogging sewage systems.

Fact #1: Paper towels consistently make up the largest portion of debris found on wastewater system filter screens accounting for almost 50%¹. This isn't surprising, considering that 44% of people who flush non-flushable items admit to flushing paper towels².

After paper towels, the biggest non-flushable offenders are baby wipes, then feminine hygiene products and, finally, household and personal care wipes.

Flushable wipes only accounted for about 8% of the debris found on screens, and even that minimal amount was there primarily due to accumulation after the blockage had started. Even pieces of toilet paper can be found on that blockage.

Myth #2: The wipes industry isn't doing anything about the issues.

Fact #2: INDA, the industry trade group, is –and has been for years—collaborating with manufacturers, the wastewater sector, retailers and communities to build awareness about safe disposal practices. Industry is working directly with representatives of the leading associations of the wastewater sector (WEF, NACWA, APWA, CWWA) to draft the latest edition of the flushability assessment tests with the goal of developing testing for flushable products that are agreeable to *everyone* with a stake in this issue, and to collaborate on educating consumers that toilets are NOT trashcans. Recently, this collaboration worked in the city of Portland, Maine – where a successful public education campaign helped reduce the flushing of baby wipes by almost two thirds³.

Myth #3: Regulating how wipes are labeled and marketed is the only way to keep non-flushable items out of city sewers.

Fact #3: The industry is in the best position to improve its products and respond with speed and agility. Legislation proposals like those in New York City, Maine, Minnesota and New Jersey focus on the wrong product—truly flushable wipes—and won't solve the problem. In fact, making flushable wipes harder to obtain would actually make the problem worse: consumers will replace flush-friendly products with other wipes NOT engineered to be flushed⁴. Flushable wipes meet real hygienic needs for consumers who

¹Combined average of INDA/Maine Waste Water Control Association/Water Environment Federation/Portland Water District Collection Study at Westbrook Pumping Station Maine: Average from three collection times: Sep. 20 & 21, 2011, Jan. 10, 2012, and "Identification of Materials Entering the Moraga Pumping Station, by Ryan Casey, November 2010, Moraga, CA.

² 2015 Omnibus. See Omnibus at <http://www.inda.org/issues-advocacy/flushability/media/>

³ INDA-MeWEA "Don't Flush Baby Wipes" Pilot Education Campaign Final Report April, 2015

⁴ 2016 New York Survey: 84% of New York City residents claim that if a product had clear "flush"/ "do not flush" label on the package, they would be more likely to buy flushable alternatives than non-flushable ones

deserve such product choices and the right to make informed decisions about product purchases. And consumers want this product information from the most credible sources: manufacturers, plumbers and water/sewage providers⁵.

Myth #4: Wipes marketed as “flushable” shouldn’t actually be flushed—manufacturers are lying.

Fact #4: Wipes marketed as “flushable” are designed, engineered and marketed to be flushed. That means they can be safely disposed of in a properly designed, operated and maintained municipal wastewater system. Manufacturers are committed to helping consumers make informed decisions about product use and disposal, not misleading on a key feature.

The industry has a rigorous set of flushability assessment tests for products that may be labeled “flushable”. It’s a set of tests that are constantly periodically updated to keep pace with the best available information, science and product innovation⁶. According to the industry Code of Practice⁷, wipes that could be used in a bathroom don’t pass these assessment tests *must carry a “Do Not Flush” symbol on their label* along with clear disposal instructions and absolutely cannot be marketed as flushable.

Myth #5: Legislation on flushable wipes is targeted at manufacturers, not our small businesses.

Fact #5: The proposed bill in New York City will levy fines on retailers who sell flushable wipes that have not specifically been approved by the City’s Department of Environmental Protection. Because it is illegal under interstate commerce laws to tax manufacturers for noncompliance with the city’s labeling requirements, the fine would necessarily be levied at the retail level. Small, independent businesses with limited resources and compliance oversight would particularly be at a disadvantage. And there will likely be unintended consequences. Like consumers buying the product they want on-line and not patronizing local retailers. Or buying non-flushable Baby Wipes to fulfill their need, which does not diminish just because a misguided law is passed. And flushing Baby Wipes makes the problem worse as those wipes can clog pumps.

⁵INDA-MeWEA “Don’t Flush Baby Wipes” Pilot Education Campaign Final Report April, 2015: Consumers responded that product manufacturers, plumbers, and water/sewage providers are the most credible communicators of flushability.

⁶ The INDA/EDANA Flushability Assessment Tests, 3rd Edition, are being used today. Currently, INDA and Wastewater representatives are in the process of writing the fourth edition of the Flushability Tests.

⁷ INDA/EDANA Code of Practice: Communicating Appropriate Pathways for Disposable Nonwoven Products to Protect Wastewater Systems, http://www.inda.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Code-of-Practice_Communicating-Appropriate-Disposal-Pathways_June-2013-FINAL.pdf”

Myth #6: There's no difference between wipes labeled as flushable and other kinds of wipes. They are all the same thing.

Fact #6: “Flushable” is a real industry term for products made of cellulosic fibers that pass the Flushability Assessment Test. That means these products hold together during use and then break down when flushed and ultimately become unrecognizable. Other kinds of wipes made with plastic fibers float and don't break down in water—they are “non-flushable”.

Flushable wipes and non-flushable wipes are designed and engineered for different uses. Therefore, they're meant to be disposed of differently. For example, baby wipes are marketed for use at a nursery changing table, so they are designed to be thrown away in a diaper pail or wrapped in a disposable diaper and tossed in the trash⁸. On the other hand, flushable cleansing wipes are designed—and marketed—for personal use in a bathroom setting and tested for compatibility with sewer systems. So these *can* safely be flushed.

Myth #7: Anything that is physically able to fit down the toilet is “flushable.”

Fact #7: A lot of items that *can* be flushed because they can go down the toilet shouldn't be, such as motor oil, antibiotics, and golf balls. That's because not all items that fit down the toilet are designed or engineered to safely break down in sewer systems. Some of the non-flushable items—those not built to be flushed that are commonly flushed -- include baby wipes, paper towels and feminine hygiene products⁹.

Just because an item *can* be flushed, doesn't mean it *should* be¹⁰.

Myth #8: All wet wipes—baby wipes, facial wipes, cleaning wipes—are “flushable.”

Fact #8: Only those wipes labeled and marketed as flushable and that pass the industry tests can be safely flushed. In fact, the flushable category only comprises 7% of wipes on the market. So, in the wipes product market category, 93% of wipes sold are not designed to be flushed, not marketed to be flushed and many carry disposal instructions to not flush. These non-flushables include baby wipes, hard-surface cleaning wipes, anti-bacterial wipes, facial wipes and many other kinds of wipes.

⁸ 2015 Omnibus: Nearly 50% of people who flush non-flushable items admit to flushing baby wipes

⁹ 2015 Omnibus: Common items consumers reported flushing included prescription drugs, cigarettes, q-tips and diapers

¹⁰INDA-MeWEA “Don't Flush Baby Wipes” Pilot Education Campaign Final Report April, 2015: The biggest issue when determining what to flush/not to flush is if it will clog the plumbing of the residence (46%). Next highest is if it will fit down the toilet without clogging (31%)

Myth 9: Better product labeling won't fix the problem—consumers will only ignore it.

Fact #9: The numbers show that proper disposal instructions on the label, when reinforced by education, works. Consumers primarily decide what to flush based on what they have learned from past experience or how the product feels¹¹—not based on information gleaned from product packaging. So building awareness of proper disposal practices and directing consumers to look for on-package instructions are key. For example, in Maine, after consumers understood the impact of improper disposal and were made aware of product labeling, they flushed significantly fewer baby wipes¹².

Consumers also recognize and understand the “Do Not Flush” symbol on product packaging¹³. Consumers want to do the right thing and, given the right information, we believe they will. But giving them that information is key.



¹¹ NY Survey: When deciding what to flush, over half of New Yorkers (54%) make the decision based on what they've been taught to flush/not flush from others in the past, while one in three (35%) feel the product (for thickness, etc.).

¹² INDA-MeWEA “Don't Flush Baby Wipes” Pilot Education Campaign Final Report April, 2015

¹³ INDA-MeWEA “Don't Flush Baby Wipes” Pilot Education Campaign Final Report April, 2015: Even though 59% of respondents said they had never seen the INDA “No Flush” symbol prior to the education campaign, 94% understood that it meant a product should not be flushed and it was rated as the best way of communicating to consumers what products should not be flushed