

5-5-17 Taking a Swipe at Wipes

The first time I ever heard of “flushable wipes” was many years ago when a resident called the board of health to discuss their septic problems in a relatively young septic system. This should not have been happening; so, they were understandably upset. Before beginning the costly replacement of the leaching area, everyone was in agreement on one thing: let’s find out what went wrong, so that the problem is not repeated. After looking at water records (Water use that exceeds the design of the system can flood it, sending it into hydraulic failure.) and asking lots of questions about garbage disposal, grease, and pumping records, among other factors, it was what the septic pumper found that was deemed to be at least one culprit.

When the system was backing up and breaking out in the yard, the owners called their septic pumping company to clean the tank, hoping for an answer. The answer was a shock to the owners. They were using a type of wipe touted as flushable and the mother greatly appreciated this product as an assistant to toilet training. After all, the package said, “flushable”; so what was the problem? The problem was that there they sat in the septic tank, not breaking down as toilet paper does. They floated along and got stuck on the filter that sits in the outlet pipe from the tank. These filters had been in use for only a few years and they were celebrated as being the savior of the most expensive part of a septic system: the leaching area. But now we were seeing the weakest link; if people didn’t understand the existence of and purpose of the filter and allowed objects to clog or block it. Or, in this case, if there was no filter, the wipes floated out to the leaching area, clogging and choking it to death. That system was in Halifax.

Many years later, wipes are sold for baby bottoms, sanitizing hands, sanitizing surfaces and even for intimacy confidence! However, they are still the bane of anyone involved with septic systems, even large wastewater treatment plants. Around the country, municipalities are dealing with these sturdy cloth-like objects interfering with septic systems, large and small. One such example is the report of Richard Stradling, of Raleigh News and Observer. There, Stradling tells of the Raleigh Wastewater Treatment Superintendent, T.J. Lynch, seeing overflows caused by these wipes not breaking down like they’re supposed to.

What’s a person supposed to do when wondering about product claims? Go to the consumer experts, of course! There were so many complaints and questions about flushable wipes, Consumer Reports. Org, decided to study the situation. In true myth buster form, they set up a cylinder of water to swirl around, replicating the flushing of a toilet. They added toilet paper. No problem; within seconds the mere swirling of water was enough action and force to cause the paper to disintegrate. And the wipes? After thirty minutes of swirling, the experimenters stopped counting and waiting, for the wipe was still intact!

You can watch the video of Consumer Reports. Org demonstration and test of this particular outrageous product claim at their site: <http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/video-hub/home--garden/bed--bath/flushable-wipes/16935265001/22783507001/>

At a recent inspection in Plympton, we were investigating a pressure dosing system. Those systems have narrow one and a half inch pipes with small holes drilled into them rather than the four inch pipes in most systems. At the very end of that narrow pipe about fifty feet long, was a wipe, completely plugging the small hole. It was completely intact; not one tiny bit disintegrated.

I have a feeling that we are being laughed at in Europe. We reside in a country known for having great plumbing but perhaps being on the backward side (Ha! No pun intended) of understanding human nature. Are our puritan origins showing? Oh, my!

In situations requiring some assistance in the cleaning-up area, we can take care of that and the environment at the same time. It just takes some foresight and a few minutes of preparation. You can pack a squirt bottle filled with water and folded sections of toilet paper. You can safely add plain aloe gel to the water, if you wish, but no oil, unless you can toss the paper into the rubbish instead of the toilet. This method can be used at home or packed for traveling. Not only does it help the environment, you are saving big bucks when you make your own, truly flushable, wipes! Use a re-useable container and you are ahead of the game!

If I have convinced you that wipes should not be flushed down the toilet but have not convinced you to save money by making your own, please at least consider this: wipes are used for many purposes and in many cases can be washed, dried and re-used. If that doesn't convince you of their sturdiness, I don't know what will! Sanitizing wipes used around the house, office or school on surfaces such as counters, doorknobs and floors can be washed, dried and put back into the original container with about a half teaspoon of bleach and enough water to cover the wipes. They are then ready to use again.

Or, just don't use them at all. For the toilet, use toilet paper. For household cleaning, use washable cloths.

Yankee thrift meets European antiquity? Maybe, but I'll gladly take the thrift and the end of being duped by advertisement. Save money, save the environment, save your sanity! Here's to the future, without being duped.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax and Plympton, MA. You can tell her your septic stories at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us

