

Not-so-disposable wipes

By Connie Sullivan, Oregon Sea Grant Boater Outreach

COVID-19 has changed so many aspects of our lives. One major change has been how we clean surfaces and our hands.

An easy way to do that is using premoistened wipes. But where should they go when you're done?

Not down the toilet.

Since the pandemic started, these convenient wipes have burdened sewage systems around the country. (Remember the toilet paper shortage and the empty shelves of cleaning products?) Many wipes, including baby wipes, are advertised as being flushable; however, the majority do not break down like toilet paper. They can plug up pipes and pumps, damage equipment at wastewater treatment plants, and push sewage into basements. In [Virginia](#), for example, workers hoisted a massive knot of garbage out of a city drain. The tangle included wipes, which can twist into ropy wads. In [Maryland](#), wipes clogged a sewer line, causing untreated wastewater to overflow from a maintenance hole into a creek.

To avoid similar problems, in March 2020, [Washington](#) became the first state to sign into law a bill that requires "Do Not Flush" labeling on premoistened, nonwoven wipes sold in the state. [Oregon](#) followed suit in June 2021.

Unfortunately, marinas are not immune to the problem. Many managers of coastal pumpout and porta potty dump stations in Oregon have described significant issues with wipes clogging their systems since the start of the pandemic. The wipes caused blockages that shut down some facilities for days to weeks while managers tore up yards of piping to find and remove the clog and replace the pipes. In one case, a clog had created so much pressure that the pumpout station broke, and sewage spilled into the waterway. Pumpouts and porta potty dump stations use the same pipes that go to shore-side facilities so when one machine has a clog, both machines are affected. One marina has had so many repeated issues, even with warning signs posted, that they had to resort to locking the unit between users. Users must call the harbor master and have staff come down to unlock the porta potty dump station, which takes time for both the staff member and the boater.

Want to see how the problem is caused? Here's a little science experiment to try at home: Find three sealable containers and place some water in them. Place a piece of toilet paper in one, a tissue in another, and a wipe in the third. Seal them up and give them a good shake for about a minute. The toilet paper will disintegrate right away, the tissue will show a little breaking up, and the wipe will remain unchanged. This is exactly what happens in pipes – and why tissues are not a suitable replacement if you run out of toilet paper, unless you throw it in the garbage after use.

While it's great that you're being careful about sanitation, please remember that the wipes need to go in a bag and in the trash after their use on your fun day on the water. Definitely don't stop cleaning – just take care of where you dispose of the wipes so we can keep our pumpouts and porta potty dump stations open and our waterways clean. And remember, just because packaging says the wipes are "flushable," it doesn't mean they are.