

Flushability – Blocked Sewers

EDANA is the primary association representing the European nonwovens industry and is taking a leading role in the development of test methods to determine flushability criteria for nonwovens products and associated labelling requirements.

Sewage systems are designed to transport waste products in water to sewage works where they can be properly treated.

Flushable products are designed to pass through sewer systems and degrade in water - and assuming reasonable amounts are used - will not cause problems in modern sewage systems.

Unfortunately, some people flush anything down the toilet that physically fits. This can include items not designed to be flushed and that may not travel easily through the system, especially older sewers where the potential for materials to snag is higher.

The result is increasing numbers of clogged toilets, blocked sewers, unpleasant overflows and high costs for householders and water companies in clearing the blockages. Problems are made worse by the disposal of cooking oils into drains; these oils can solidify to make fatbergs that may eventually block sewers, even causing major blockages in some of the wider main systems.

The problem can be magnified by the presence of items not intended to be flushed that don't break down easily in water. Examples would include some types of wet wipes (such as baby and cleaning wipes), ear buds, sanitary pads and tampons. Such products can contribute to the formation of 'fatbergs' and can also directly block smaller drains.

CPI supports the EDANA Code of Practice requiring prominent on-pack 'do not flush' labelling for items that don't degrade in water and raising consumer awareness to drive behavioural change.

<https://www.edana.org/industry-initiatives/flushability>

Anything labelled as "do not flush" should not be disposed of via the sewer. Where possible, reasonably clean organic based and plastic free products should be recycled or composted; contaminated or products containing plastics should always be disposed of as solid waste via waste collections.

Consumer confusion

Research by manufacturers and water companies has identified consumer confusion about what can and what cannot be flushed, especially with items that look broadly similar to toilet tissue products that are intended to be flushed.

With an increasing number of different products on the market, work is continuing to provide guidance to better define which products can be safely flushed with no risk to the sewage system and which products cannot. EDANA and Water UK (endorsed by Defra) have formed a technical work group tasked with agreeing UK standards on flushability.

The results of this research should be communicated to consumers through clear on-pack guidance on disposal methods.

Example of on-pack labelling:



Further Information

CPI represents the interests of the Paper-based Industries in the UK, while EDANA (<https://www.edana.org/>) represents the nonwovens industry in Europe. AHPMA (<http://ahpma.co.uk/>) is the trade association representing UK manufacturers of disposable nappies, feminine hygiene products and continence care products.

A number of CPI Members produce both paper-type products and also nonwoven-type products (which may or may not be flushable), as well as varied hygiene products that are. All support the call for clear on-pack labelling.

Definition of nonwovens. Essentially a nonwoven product is a sheet of fibres, continuous filaments, or chopped yarns formed into a web and bonded without the use of weaving or knitting.

The manufacturing process is broadly similar to papermaking in that product is made by combining fibers or filaments together to make into a continuous sheet. For making paper, the fibres are then simply dried by presses and heat, while nonwovens are bonded together by the use of mechanical entanglement, adhesive or thermo-bonding.

A more technical description can be found on the EDANA website:
<https://www.edana.org/discover-nonwovens/what-are-nonwovens>

Flushability. EDANA has published a guide for manufacturers to assess the flushability of product. The GD4 document can be found on the EDANA website at:
<https://www.edana.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/guidelines-for-assessing-the-flushability-of-disposable-nonwoven-products-ed-4-finalb76f3ccdd5286df88968ff0000bfc5c0.pdf?sfvrsn=6>

Biodegradability. After products break up, it's important they fully biodegrade and don't remain as contaminants in the environment, as would be the case with plastic fibres. CPI supports calls for flushable products to contain no plastic.

It follows that flushable products should be made from bio-degradable materials (including those derived from wood). However, biodegradability is only one of many criteria for determining if a product is flushable.

More information on the biodegradation of cellulose derived products can be found at:
<https://www.edana.org/industry-initiatives/flushability/biodegradability-of-viscose>

Please see the websites of EDANA and AHPMA for additional briefing.

Confederation of Paper Industries

- The Confederation of Paper Industries (CPI) is the leading trade association representing the UK's Paper-based Industries, comprising paper and board manufacturers and converters, corrugated packaging producers, makers of soft tissue papers and collectors of paper for recycling.
- CPI represents an industry with an aggregate annual turnover of £11.5 billion, with 56,000 direct and a further 86,000 indirect employees.
- For facts on the UK's Paper-based Industries please visit: www.paper.org.uk.

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