

The unflushables

45 mins

Guides

About this activity

What we flush down the loo can make its way to our beaches and ocean, harming animals and making our beaches look unpleasant. Find out how to take simple steps in your bathroom to help the ocean.

Outcomes:

- Learn about the pollution caused by items flushed down the toilet and identify ways to reduce it
- Consider alternatives to single-use period products

You will need:

For each group or person:

- A baby wipe
- A piece of toilet paper
- Two 1 litre bottles, three-quarters full with water
- [Unflushables Fact File](#)
- [Social media template](#)

The unflushables

When sanitary items like wipes, tampons and nappies are flushed down the loo, they can create blockages in sewers. In a blockage, to stop sewage 'backing up' and flooding people's homes, emergency valves are triggered and sewage is released into local rivers and the sea.

Part 1 Wipe-out

1. In groups of four, add a piece of toilet paper to one of the bottles of water and screw the lid on tightly. Ask one person in the group to shake the bottle for 30 seconds, then pass it around until everyone has shaken it for 30 seconds.
2. Now do the same thing again with the wet wipe. What's different?
3. Talk about the difference between the bottles. What would this mean if the wipe and paper were in the sea?

Thousands of wipes are found on our beaches every year because people flush them down the toilet instead of putting them in the bin. They escape from sewage works or are released into rivers and the sea when drains overflow in heavy rain. What might happen to marine wildlife if they ingest a wet wipe?

Part 2 Unflushables

1. Wet wipes are one of the 5 items that cause problems when flushed down the loo. These are called 'The Unflushables'. In small groups or as a unit, use the [Unflushables Fact File](#) to find out more about the problem.
2. Discuss what could be done to encourage people to put only the three Ps (pee, poo, paper) down the loo.

Part 3 Plastic-free periods

Period products were the fifth most commonly found item on European beaches, according to a study by the European Parliament in 2018. These products also contain plastic. It's thought that some tampons contain around 5% of plastic and a pack of 14 menstrual pads can contain as much plastic as five carrier bags.

As a unit, you could research alternatives to single-use period products and how to go plastic free. What could be the environmental and financial benefits of reusable and plastic-free products?

Part 4 Spread the word

1. Can you come up with ideas for things your family or friends could do? For example, could you make posters for the toilets at your unit meeting place and other places in your local area, such as cafes, restaurants, your school? Could you encourage people to share information on their social media accounts? You could use our [social media template](#) when creating your message.
2. Could you make up a song, poem, short play or advert to tell people about the unflushables problem and what they can do to help?

Unflushables Fact File



What are 'unflushable' items?



Baby wipes



Cotton buds



Contact lenses



Cleaning wipes



Sanitary towels



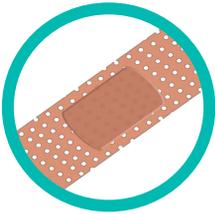
Tampons and applicators



Medicine



Nappies



Plasters



Cigarette butts



What's the problem?



Unflushables build up into fatbergs and block sewers

When flushed down the loo, items like wet wipes, nappies, tampons and sanitary towels combine with fat, oil and grease to create massive fatbergs. These can grow so large that they block whole sewer pipes, causing sewage to back up in toilets and flood people's houses.



The items are released into rivers when drains overflow

In heavy rainstorms, our drainage systems become overwhelmed by the large volumes of water. To prevent houses and towns flooding, overflow pipes are opened so that water can leave the system quickly. Unfortunately, these overflow pipes put untreated water straight into rivers and any unflushables in the pipes will be discharged into the river.



Once they reach the sea, unflushable items can harm wildlife

Unflushables are made largely of plastic and break up into thousands of tiny plastic fibres. Marine life can ingest these fibres, along with the attached toxic chemicals and bacteria, causing them harm.

Unflushables Fact File



10 things you need to know about unflushable marine litter

- 1** 5.9% of all beach litter items in the UK are items that were flushed down the toilet when they should've gone in the bin.
- 2** Wet wipes were the third most-common item found on UK beaches in 2020.
- 3** Period products were the fifth most-common item found on European beaches in 2018.
- 4** Wipes labelled as 'flushable' don't always meet the [Fine to Flush](#) standard and can cause blockages.
- 5** Some tampons are made up of around 6% plastic, and sanitary pads can be as much as 90% plastic. This means that a pack of 14 pads can contain as much plastic as five carrier bags!
- 6** If you piled up skips full of all the unflushables found in our sewers, it would reach the height of Everest.
- 7** Unflushables are made of plastic and never fully break down. They remain in the ocean, collecting toxic chemicals and bacteria. This is a severe threat to marine animals that ingest them.
- 8** Around 2.5 million tampons, 1.4 million pads and 700,000 panty liners are flushed down toilets in the UK. It has been estimated that over 1.5 billion period products are flushed in the UK every year!
- 9** Menstrual products and their packaging generate 200,000 tonnes of waste per year in the UK.
- 10** Around 2 million people in the UK wear daily disposable contact lenses, which are a form of plastic. Each year, as many as 750 million contact lenses are flushed down the loo or end up in landfill. Many get washed down the plughole as they dry out on the side of the sink. Many opticians run recycling collection schemes, but take-up is still low.

How does our waste reach the sea?

Sewerage System

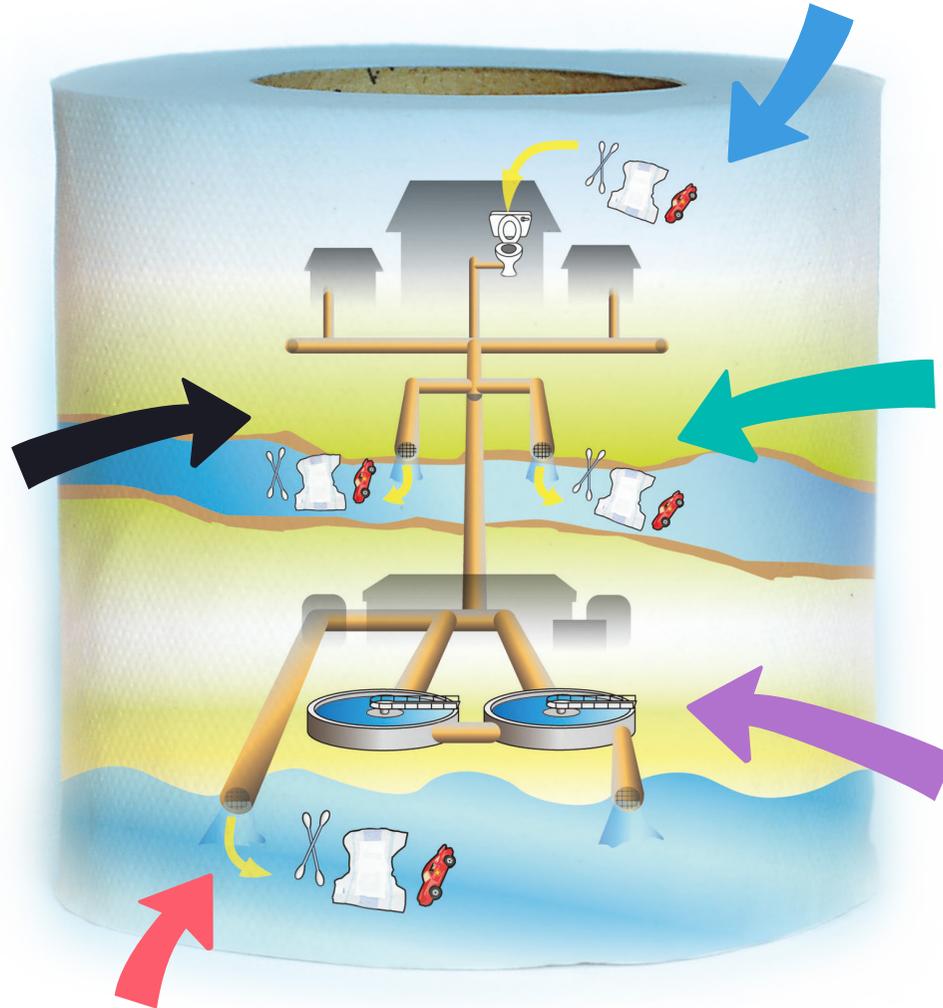
Our homes, schools and other buildings are connected to our sewerage system. This is a network of pipes designed to take human waste after it has been flushed down the toilet, to the sewerage treatment works where it is processed, made safe to humans and animals and then returned to sea. Our sewerage system also collects rainwater from drains and directs this to the sea, to prevent our towns from flooding.

Overflows

These are the sewerage networks emergency release valves. During heavy rain, or if the pipes become blocked with items that should not be flushed down the toilet, there is not enough room in the pipes and they have to release into local streams and rivers. This is so that the waste does not back up and flood people's homes!

Overflows

There are grills over the end of outflow pipes but smaller items, like cotton buds and bits of plastic that have been flushed down the toilet still get through, and can end up in the ocean and on our beaches.



Misconnections

This is when household drains are plumbed into the wrong external drain. Sewage water that should be transported to wastewater treatment plants is instead drained directly into rivers.

Sewerage Treatment Works

This is where our waste water and sewage is treated to a series of processes to make sure that it is safe to be released into the sea and back into the water cycle. Water from here is no longer harmful to us.



Stop the Unflushables!

Write and draw your message for people in the square below.

Think about:

- What do you want people to know about 'unflushables'?
- What can people do?
- How can you grab people's attention?

A large, empty square with a teal border, intended for students to draw and write their message.

Share the message

Take a photo of your picture and ask people you know with social media to post it on their accounts, or post on your own if you have one.