

Wet Wipe Fact File



The problem

At last year's Great British Beach Clean, an average of 18 wet wipes were found for every 100 metres of coastline cleaned and surveyed, making them the third most common litter item on UK beaches in 2020. (1) Wet wipes find their way to the beach when people flush them down the toilet.

Plastic pollution

Some wet wipes contain plastic fibres, and they therefore pose a threat to marine wildlife.

These plastic items, along with the toxic chemicals and bacteria that attach to them on their journey down the drain, might be accidentally ingested. When wet wipes eventually start to break up they become microplastics, making them more easily ingested by marine animals.



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1. Marine Conservation Society 2020

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Saturated sewers

In sewers, wet wipes can combine with fat, grease and oil to form giant fatbergs. However, only 5% is actual fat – 93% is wet wipes! (2) One of the biggest fatbergs found in London was longer than Tower Bridge and as heavy as 11 double-decker buses. (3) Fatbergs cost the UK a staggering £90 million per year to remove. (4)



Whitechapel fatberg sample at the Museum of London. © Seeing Sanitation



A drain pipe on the beach. © MCS/Kate Wilson

Wet wipes can reach the ocean from sewer systems in several ways:

- Fatbergs block sewage drains and can cause sewage to overflow into our streams, rivers and ocean
- Some wet wipes can get through sewage treatment works to end up on our beaches
- Drains can overflow after heavy rain when the system cannot cope with the volume of water
- Between 15,000 and 500,000 homes in the UK are thought to have drain misconnections. (5) 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.

2 & 3. BBC 2017

4. Grease Guardian 2017

5. The Rivers Trust 2019

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The solution

- Don't put oil down the sink, as this helps create fatbergs. Wait for the pan to cool, wipe the oil off with a tissue, and dispose of in the bin instead.
- We've worked with industries to remove plastics from wet wipes labelled 'flushable', and to ensure clear 'do not flush' labelling on all wet wipes unless they pass the Fine to Flush standard.
- Helping consumers understand the problem through education and raising awareness can help to reduce the number of wet wipes being flushed. Check out the video of [Wallace the wet wipe monster](#) used around the country to highlight the problem.
- Highlighting which brands don't contain plastic helps consumers make more responsible choices. Find out more in the results of our [wet wipe survey](#) of UK high street retailers.

It can be confusing to know which wet wipes are fine to flush. If you're unsure, then pop it in the bin instead and only flush the 3 Ps (pee, poo, and paper) down the toilet.



A wet wipe in sand. © Natasha Ewins



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