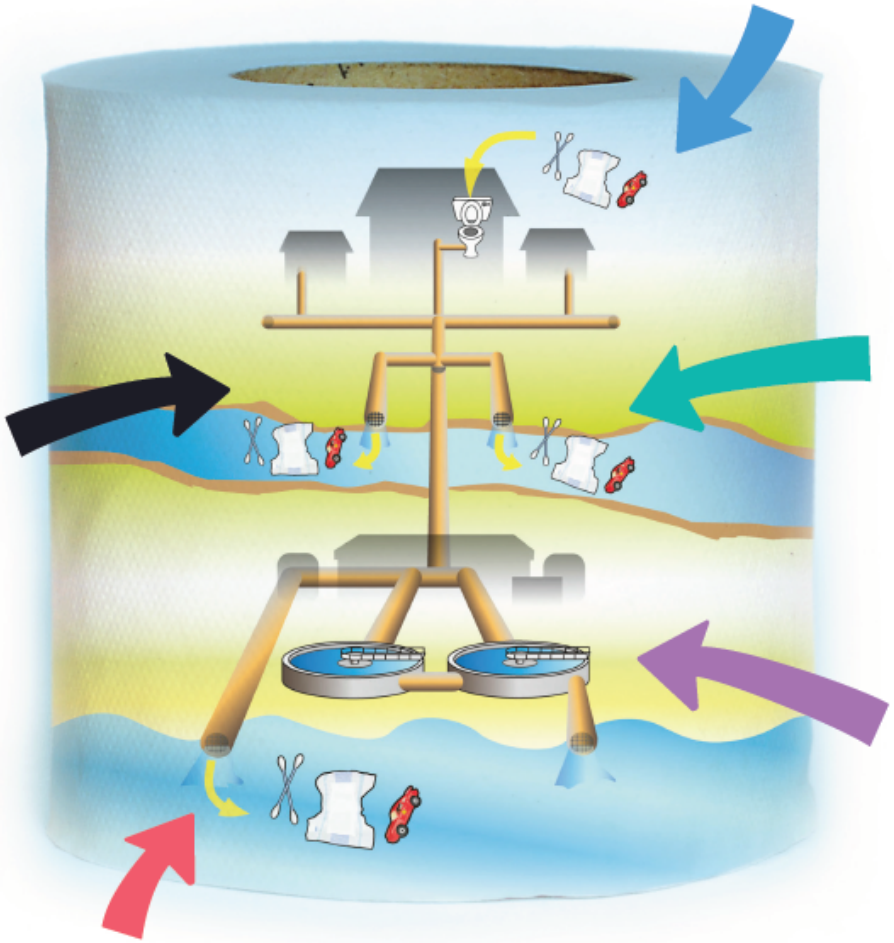
MARINE CONSERVATION SOCIETY

Unflushables Image Reel

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.



Misconnections

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

Overflows

These are the sewerage networks emergency release values. 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!

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.

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.

Fatbergs

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! (1)

One of the biggest fatbergs found in London was longer than Tower Bridge and as heavy as 11 double-decker buses. (2)

Did you know that fatbergs cost the UK a staggering £90 million per year to remove? (3)

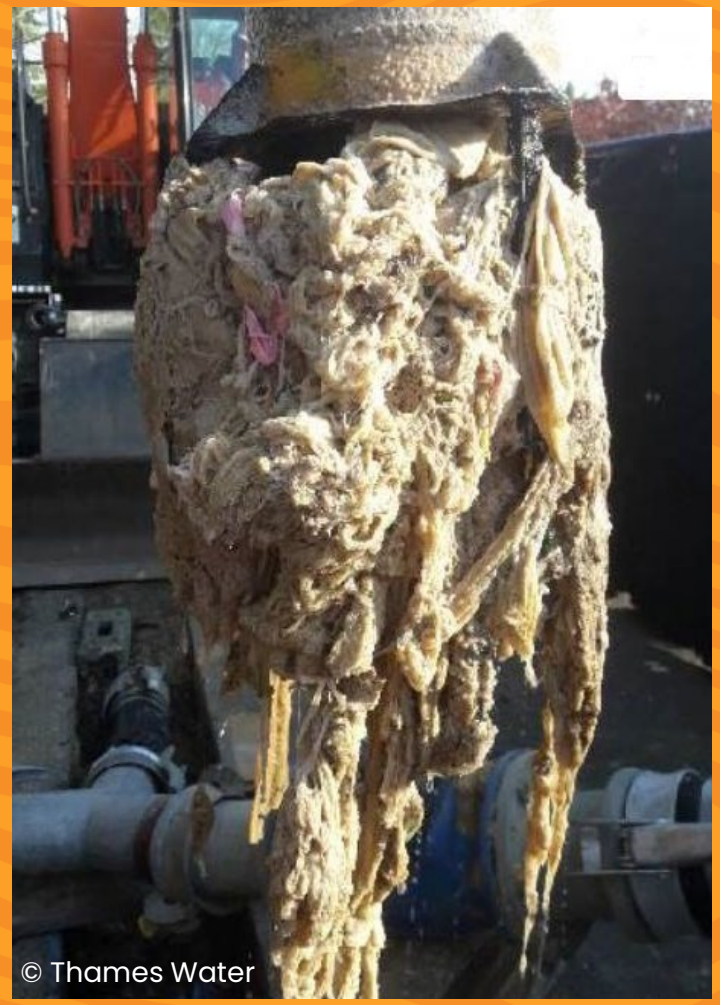
Whitechapel fatberg sample at the Museum of London.
© Seeing Sanitation via Flickr

The solution

Don't put oil down the sink, as this helps create fatbergs. Wait for pans to cool, wipe the oil off with a tissue, and dispose of in the bin instead.

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.

1. BBC 2017
2. Grease Guardian 2017
3. The Rivers Trust 2019



Fatbergs

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)

From sewers to sea

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

Misconnections

Between 15,000 and 500,000 homes in the UK are thought to have drain misconnections. (1)

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1. The Rivers Trust 2019

Plastic pollution

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1. Marine Conservation Society 2020

Plastic pollution

Some wet wipes contain plastic fibres and pose a severe 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.

Raising Awareness

Click here to watch the video
***Wet Wipes Turn Nasty*!**

Wallace

We created Wallace the wet wipe monster in 2017 to help raise awareness of wet wipes as a source of pollution.

Wallace toured with us around the UK and helped to collect over 10,000 signatures for a petition asking the industry for change.

Fine to Flush logo. © Water UK

Fine to Flush

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.

Bincentives

We've worked with students across the UK to inspire schools to take action on plastic pollution. Bincentives was an initiative designed by students of Hampton High School, London. It focuses on a series of posters displaying emoji messages, aiming to engage students by rewarding positive behaviour with school-determined rewards.