



**Choice**  
**October, 2015**  
 Page: 25  
 Section: General News  
 Region: National, AU  
 Circulation: 150000  
 Type: Magazines Lifestyle  
 Size: 1,674.00 sq.cms.



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 CUT STRAIGHT TO YOUR NEWS

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## The messy truth

Your wet wipes may be labelled 'flushable', but plumbing experts tell **Kate Browne** a different story

**I**n a world obsessed with convenience and cleanliness, wet wipes are perhaps the ultimate manifestation of our obsession.

Pre-moistened single-use cloths have been around for years, and there'd be plenty of us who've used them out and about when there's no access to a sink. Wipes have also been a godsend for parents when it comes to cleaning up babies' bottoms, little hands and faces.

A stroll down any supermarket aisle now reveals wet wipes for make-up removal, toddlers' noses, floor cleaning, toilet cleaning, and even wipes that

But are they flushable? Not according to Australia's water service providers, who are spending an estimated \$15 million a year clearing blockages they say are largely caused by wet wipes.

### Does it disintegrate?

"Just because something is flushable doesn't mean it breaks down," says Sydney Water media and communications advisor Peter Hadfield, holding up his mobile phone. "Technically my phone is flushable, but that doesn't mean it should go down the toilet."

**"They're not breaking down, and in some cases not even moving out of the pipes"**

promise to leave adult bottoms "extra clean and fresh". To make things even easier, we're told (on the packaging) that many of these wipes are now 'flushable'.

While the makers of flushable wipes claim that these products are "designed to dissolve and disintegrate" and "break up ... like toilet paper", those who work

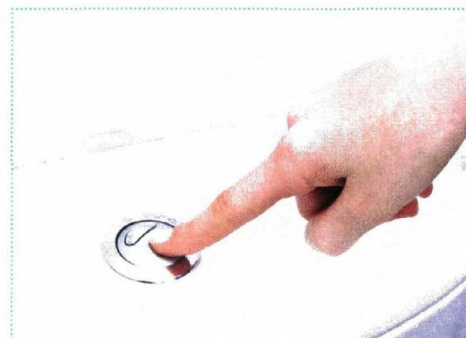
### FLUSHABLE WIPES

in the wastewater industry and plumbers across the land strongly disagree.

CHOICE's visit to Sydney Water's Malabar wastewater facility confirmed the havoc being wreaked by these products. Workers there told us they remove serious blockages caused by wipes at least once every two weeks, and showed us the balls of tangled and sodden wipes collected in the system's screening process. "It's had a huge impact on our day-to-day work. The wipes have made a lot of things go wrong. We have to get in there and shovel it all out manually," says Fiona Copeman, who works as a production officer at Sydney Water. "It's very unpleasant and labour intensive, and there's been a real increase in these wipes coming through."

CHOICE contacted a number of water services around Australia who all confirmed an increase in wet wipes blocking pipes over the past few years. Queensland Urban Utilities says responding to blockages now costs the organisation approximately \$2.5 million a year, with wet wipes largely to blame.

As can be expected, these growing maintenance costs will soon start coming out of our own pockets in the form of higher water bills. ▶



### CAN YOU FLUSH IT?

Experts say the only things safe to flush are the 3 Ps:

- poo
- pee
- paper (toilet paper, that is).

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK





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### Backyard blockage

Sydney plumber Darren Clancy says he's spending an increasing amount of time pulling wet wipes out of home pipes, and his customers are genuinely surprised to find wipes labelled as flushable can cause such damage: "They usually find out when I hand them a bill for \$1000."

It seems costs can skyrocket from there. Some Sydney Water customers have reportedly incurred personal plumbing costs as high as \$16,000, thanks to wipes blocking and bursting pipes. Other customers have had their backyards covered in raw sewage when blocked pipes backed up and overflowed.

### Weasel words

For the humble consumer, flushable wipe claims are confusing. Manufacturers are trumpeting words like "dispersible" and "biodegradable", while the water industry urges the public to ignore what it claims is marketing spin.

Plumber Darren Clancy is blunt. "To call these flushable is insane ... they're not breaking down, and in some cases not even moving out of the pipes. I've been doing this job for 30 years and wipes are now causing the worst blockages I've ever seen."

### The CHOICE test

CHOICE put flushable product claims to the test using an agitation device designed to create a similar environment to the wastewater system.



We put 12 brands of wipes (11 of which were labelled as flushable and one brand that was labelled 'do not flush') into the agitator along with 8-ply toilet paper and ran the agitator for six hours.

Within minutes the toilet paper started to break up and eventually disintegrated, while all the wipes remained completely intact apart from the occasional small tear. (To watch our test and see which brands we tested, head to [choice.com.au/flushablewipes](http://choice.com.au/flushablewipes).)

### Industry says

CHOICE contacted four manufacturers of wipes labelled as 'flushable'.

A spokesperson for Kimberly Clark told us that their Kleenex Cottonelle Flushable Cleansing Cloths lose strength and break up when moving through the sewerage system after flushing. Asaleo Care said its Sorbent Silky White Flushable Wipes are "a fully dispersible and biodegradable product that breaks down as it moves from household to water treatment facilities".

The Kimberly Clark spokesperson added that their products are tested using guidelines formulated by the major wipes industry associations in the US and Europe (EDANA and INDANA).

Many people working in water services are critical of the EDANA/INDANA guidelines, because they've been developed in-house by the 'non-woven' industry – the very same industry that manufactures wipes. Adam Lovell, executive director of Water Services Association of Australia (WSAA), says the industry guidelines should be replaced by an independent, expert test.

### THE DIRTY FACTS

**1 in 4**  
people in Sydney  
are flushing  
wet wipes

Sydney Water  
has removed more than  
1000 tonnes of wet wipe  
materials from its  
wastewater system in the  
past two years. If laid end  
to end, that's enough  
wet wipes to reach LA  
and back again

Wet wipes  
increase the risk of  
pipe blockages and  
overflows to local  
creeks and rivers

About  
**75%**  
of all sewer  
blockages involve  
wet wipes  
Info provided by  
Sydney Water

"At the moment there's absolutely no standard [or] agreed term on what's flushable and what disintegrates. It's just labelling." At the time of publication neither Woolworths or Coles, who produce private-label wipes, had responded to our enquiries.

### Getting agreement

As wastewater systems around the world struggle with flushable products, there is one light at the end of the clogged-up tunnel. An international standard,

expected to be completed by the end of 2016, will outline the tests that can be used to define if a product is able to be flushed and the appropriate labelling requirements.

In the meantime, water utilities around Australia will continue trying to spread the word that, despite the promises on packaging and TV ads, flushing any kind of wipe down the toilet is a bad idea. ■