

SuperBrothers Sounds Alarm: A New Threat to America's Wastewater Systems

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The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced a new challenge for wastewater treatment facilities and environmental agencies across the United States: the improper disposal of personal protective equipment (PPE) such as wipes, masks, and gloves.

These items are causing significant blockages in sewers and storm drains, leading to increased maintenance

costs and environmental concerns. As both urban and rural areas struggle with the influx of PPE waste, the need for public awareness and proper disposal practices becomes ever more critical.



In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, officials reported a significant increase in sewer blockages caused by discarded masks and gloves. The city's wastewater treatment plants have seen a 25% rise in maintenance calls related to PPE waste. Similarly, in Los Angeles, California, the sanitation department has noted a 30% increase in clogged storm drains due to improperly disposed of wipes and masks.

The problem is not confined to large cities. In rural areas like Rockwall, Texas, officials had to remove a massive clog from a lift station that pumps wastewater to a treatment plant. The blockage was composed of about 80% flushable wipes combined with other debris, including masks and gloves. This required extensive efforts to remove and highlighted the widespread nature of the issue.

The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) has raised concerns about the impact of PPE waste on already deteriorating infrastructure. Darren Olson, vice chairman of the ASCE's Committee for America's Infrastructure, emphasized that even items like latex gloves, which may not cause immediate clogs, contribute to the overall burden on the system. In areas with combined sewage and stormwater systems, discarded masks and gloves that litter sidewalks and parking lots can also reach treatment plants, exacerbating the problem.

The environmental impact of improperly disposed PPE is also significant. George Leonard, chief scientist at Ocean Conservancy, expressed concerns that discarded PPE could wash out to sea, adding to the existing plastic pollution burden in the oceans. This not only affects marine life but also poses broader environmental risks.

The financial cost of addressing these clogs is substantial. In New York City, the Department of Environmental Protection has spent over \$1 million in the past year to address blockages caused by PPE waste. In Michigan's Macomb County, officials spent \$50,000 in 2018 to remove a "fatberg" of debris, oils, and grease that was 100 feet long and 11 feet wide. The community has also invested millions in installing screens to snag thousands of pounds of wipes weekly.

Municipal officials are urging the public to dispose of PPE properly to prevent further damage to the wastewater infrastructure. The message is clear: only human waste and toilet paper should be flushed down toilets. Despite packaging claims, most wipes are not suitable for flushing and can cause significant blockages. Public education campaigns are being launched in many cities to raise awareness about the proper disposal of PPE and other waste.

The improper disposal of wipes, masks, and gloves is creating significant challenges for wastewater treatment facilities and environmental agencies across the United States. The financial and environmental costs are mounting, and immediate action is needed to address this issue. By raising public awareness and promoting proper disposal practices, we can help protect our infrastructure and the environment from the adverse effects of PPE waste.

Quote:

"The improper disposal of PPE is not only straining wastewater infrastructure but also posing serious environmental risks. Addressing this issue is vital for maintaining our systems and protecting our ecosystems."

Boilerplate:

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