

Wetwipes and fatbergs

..... a personal rant by Julia Waterlow about misuse of our sewerage system.

With Jill Goulder, 2016

<https://transitiontownlewes.org/>

Lewesians have first-hand experience of inappropriate materials shoved down our sewage pipes: the closure of Station Street in recent weeks was allegedly caused by bedsheets of all things blocking the underground pipework system. Although that's extreme, the day-to-day rubbish put down our foul-water system, from toilets and sinks, is pretty gruesome if you're beach-cleaning along our coasts.

As well as the yuk factor, wet-wipes are a risk to wildlife as creatures mistake them for food. The Marine Conservation Society's Great British Beach Clean survey reported that the number of wet-wipes on UK beaches more than doubled between 2013 and 2014. *'This rise in pollution of our oceans and beaches is mainly due to the fact that people want convenience and so many people treat their toilet like a bin'*. Wet-wipes, like nappies, sanitary towels and cotton-buds are designed not to disintegrate in water; even 'flushable' biodegradable ones take some time to decompose. The sewage treatment filters don't always catch everything – though the water companies still ferry tons of waste from the sewage filters to landfill.

Microbeads are one of the more recent unpleasant waste-products going down our drains. They are tiny pieces of plastic that are added to everyday cosmetic products, face-wash, toothpaste, abrasive cleaners etc. They are too small to be filtered out at water treatment works and they are being found in creatures all over the oceans in addition to the other plastics they ingest, and of course end up in us: see <https://secure.greenpeace.org.uk/page/-/microbeads-infographic.jpg>. They are now banned in the USA and Canada, but not yet in the UK: do check labels for their presence.

Congealed fat is another major issue, causing 'fatbergs' such as the "bus-sized lump" of food-fat mixed with wet-wipes found in a drain under Kingston-upon-Thames in 2013. Nearer to home, a friend's garden in Western Road in Lewes was flooded with foul water on Christmas Day from fat blocking a drain.

And finally, chemicals disposed of down the sink or loo can't always be dealt with by the water-treatment plants – and pouring them down an outside drain is even worse, as surface-water drains in general flow directly into rivers. On that subject, check that all your plumbing connects to the foul-water sewage system and not to surface-water drains: apparently washing machines are frequently incorrectly plumbed.

What to do to help? 'Bin it, don't flush it' - just use your loo for pee, paper and poo. Clean grease etc off plates with kitchen towels or newspaper before washing up, putting the used paper in your food-waste or compost. Put unwanted liquid fat, and chemicals like white spirit, in a jar and take it to the household chemicals section of

the recycling centre. And on 16th-19th September there's the Big Beach Clean – do join in! [http://www.mcsuk.org/what we do/Clean+seas+and+beaches](http://www.mcsuk.org/what_we_do/Clean+seas+and+beaches).

PS While I'm on a rant, I'd like to mention WC cleaning products. Bleach and all those expensive commercial products can wreak havoc on fragile ecosystems. Many of them are ineffective, too, as the main cause of yukky-looking loos is limescale, especially with our hard water. Cheap, effective and kinder to the environment is citric acid (buy packs from Bunce in Cliffe High St), which will clean the filthiest WC overnight. Happy cleaning!