

Don't feed the fatberg: what not to flush



The rubbish we dispose of down sinks and toilets is creating monster-sized blockages in sewerage systems. How can we stop them forming?

The discovery of another horrific monster-sized fatberg, this time in Sidmouth in Devon, raises the question: what can we do to stop them forming?

Vyki Sparkes is the curator of social and working history at the Museum of London, which put a chunk of the fatberg dubbed “the Whitechapel Monster” on display early last year. She says: “From the conversations we were hearing, it really made people stop and think about their own behaviour in a non-judgmental way. It wasn’t about pointing fingers, it was about taking a collective responsibility that we all have habits, and some aren’t necessarily beneficial to our cities.”

Thames Water’s campaign to educate people about how not to feed the fatberg takes pains to remind us that toilets and sinks aren’t “magic portals”. There is a simple set of rules for the bathroom: stick to flushing the three Ps: pee, poo and (toilet) paper. Everything else – sanitary towels, nappies, cotton buds, condoms, dental floss, used plasters and whatever else you might think to chuck down the toilet – should go into the bin.

Just because a product says it is flushable doesn’t mean that it is biodegradable. Baby wipes might be a godsend to parents, but not to Victorian-era sewerage systems. Wipes marketed as flushable will probably be able to make their way down your toilet but will eventually clog up the pipes further along their journey.

The kitchen is another area of concern. Water companies are keen to bust the myth that running hot water and pouring washing-up liquid down the sink ahead of fats, oils or grease will stop it building up and blocking the pipes. Their recommendation is to keep a small container, such as an old margarine tub, to hand in your kitchen, into which you can pour oil and fat before safely disposing of it in the bin.

Not following these rules can create a horror such as the Whitechapel Monster. “It was massive and disgusting,” says Sparkes. “It started hatching flies in the display case, and growing mould.”

But it did serve to raise Londoners’ awareness of the issue, showing that their habits “have an impact we don’t always see”. The chunk of fatberg is now in the museum’s permanent collection. “We’ve made a permanent commitment to the fatberg, to care for it as long as we can, to pass it on to future generations.”

But if we want those future generations to inherit working sewerage systems, we need to modify our behaviour. Fatbergs are primarily a product of our disposable lifestyles. The solution to them seems to be to ensure that things that could clog up pipes end up in incinerators or landfill instead – a case of merely shifting the problem, rather than solving it.