Coronavirus cleaning? Don’t flush disinfectant wipes, water board warns

By HANNAH FRY

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As Californians continue to stockpile disinfecting wipes and paper towels to sanitize their homes amid widespread coronavirus concerns, state water regulators this week reminded individuals to throw those items in the trash rather than flush them down the toilet.

Nylon wipes and paper towels are stronger than toilet paper and do not break down in water in the same fashion. Flushing them can quickly cause clogs, wreaking havoc on sewer systems and treatment plant pumps and resulting in spills that end up in lakes, rivers and the ocean, according to the State Water Resources Control Board.

“Flushing wipes, paper towels and similar products down toilets will clog sewers and cause backups and overflows at wastewater treatment facilities, creating an additional public health risk in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic,” the board wrote in a prepared statement. “Even wipes labeled flushable will clog pipes and interfere with sewage collection and treatment throughout the state.”

Instead, these items should be thrown in the trash, officials said.
Wastewater treatment facilities around the state have been reporting issues with their sewer management collection systems since the virus took hold, according to the water board. The agency did not provide information about specific facilities that have been affected.

The disinfectant wipes, which kill a range of bacteria and viruses, are in high demand as the coronavirus continues to spread across California. As of Wednesday morning, there have been 472 confirmed cases of the virus and 13 deaths statewide.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended that individuals disinfect high-touch surfaces in their homes daily to help stem the spread of the virus. These include tables, hard-backed chairs, doorknobs, light switches, remote controls, handles, desks, toilets and sinks.

Los Angeles County hasn’t had any major issues resulting from an increase in people flushing wipes and other items. However, blockages that cause spills build up over time, so local officials are urging the public to keep items like disposable wipes out of the sewer system.

“The water board has issued this advice in a heightened interest to keep things operational. We’re bracing for it in case it becomes a cumulative problem,” said Bill Winter, assistant deputy director of L.A. County Public Works. “The best advice for wipes disposal is to put them in the trash.”

People flushing such wipes had been an issue for wastewater treatment facilities long before the coronavirus took hold in the United States.

Assembly Bill 1672, introduced to the state Legislature last year by Assemblyman Richard Bloom (D-Santa Monica), aims to require certain nonwoven disposal products, such as wipes, to carry a label saying they should not be flushed. The bill, if passed, would establish enforcement provisions, including authorizing a civil penalty not to exceed $2,500 per violation.
Hannah Fry is a Metro reporter covering breaking news in California. She joined Times Community News in Orange County in 2013 where she covered education, Newport Beach city hall, crime and courts. She is a native of Orange County and attended Chapman University, where she was the editor-in-chief of the college newspaper, the Panther.
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