

UNDERSTANDING WET WIPE DISPOSAL BEHAVIOUR

RESEARCH REPORT

OCTOBER 2021



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction

The UK uses around 11 billion wet wipes every year, and the number of wet wipe products available to purchase is on the rise, particularly those with 'biodegradable' and other eco-labelling.

An in-depth investigation of sewer blockages in 2017 identified that wet wipes account for 93% of the material causing blockages. Water UK predicts that there are around 300,000 sewer blockages every year, costing the UK water industry and its customers around £100 million to remove them.

Blockages can also lead to sewage out spills through storm overflow pipes, leading untreated waste water into marine environments. As a result, wet wipes are the third most common litter item found on UK beaches, and are undoubtedly having drastic negative effects on the health of our marine life and environments.

This research aims to better understand flushing behaviour of wet wipes. Specifically, gaps in the evidence base include the quantity of wipes being used by the public and what percentage of these are being flushed; the specific behavioural drivers which cause people to flush wipes; how the emergence of labels such as 'biodegradable' are and 'flushable' are affecting people's understanding of what they can do and; critically, insights into what would motivate people to change their behaviour.

Methodology

A nationally representative survey was carried out online, via YouGov, with 2,349 GB adults, of which 473 were from the North West Region.

This was followed by five days of online ethnographic research, carried out with 35 North West residents, who regularly flush wet wipes down the toilet.

Results

Scale of the issue

Overall, around one in six people (17%) nationally flush wet wipes down the toilet. The most commonly flushed are toilet tissue wipes (13% of people nationally flush these, and 75% of those who use them). Based on survey data for the average number of wipes flushed per week, it is estimated that 4.2 billion wipes are being flushed each year (39% of those sold).

Demographics

Of all flushers nationally, 59% are female, and 41% male. All age groups are fairly equally likely to flush wet wipes down the toilet, although it is slightly higher in older age groups.

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Key drivers of flushing behaviour

Packaging and labels

- Eco-labelling is leading to wipes being flushed, despite 'do not flush' symbols on packaging
- There is a lack of (clear) disposal information on packaging – it is often hidden or missing completely
- Eco-labelling combined with a lack of disposal information is further driving flushing behaviour
- Many wet wipe users do not look at labels at all, therefore are not taking in any disposal information

Wipe type and use

- Any wipes used in the bathroom are more likely to be flushed – either due to them being used for toilet purposes, or simply proximity to the toilet

- Dirtier wipes are more likely to be flushed, such as those considered as 'soiled' or unhygienic
- Thicker, bigger wipes are seen as less flushable, such as surface cleaning wipes and floor wipes
- Having fewer wipes to dispose of at once makes some more likely to flush
- Other wipes, such as baby wipes, are being used in place of toilet tissue wipes due to these being seen as cheaper or better quality

Context, habits and routines

- Not having a bathroom bin is driving flushing behaviour for some; 1 in 5 do not currently have one
- Flushing can be dependent on what else is going on at the time, such as how busy or distracted they are

- Some continue flushing as this is what they have always done, and has therefore become a habit
- Overall, flushing is easy, quick, convenient, and the wipe is no longer 'my problem'

Attitudes, awareness and perceptions

- Most have an inkling that flushing wipes is wrong, although some wet wipe users can easily put this out their mind
- Others have never thought twice about flushing wipes, either they are not aware of the consequences or feel they are exempt
- Some will strictly only flush wipes labelled as flushable, although a minority of all wipe users doubt 'flushable' labelling

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- There is fairly good awareness that wipes can potentially lead to blockages, at some point along the sewage system; 88% of people nationally think that wet wipes flushed down the toilet can cause blockages. Among flushers, 66% think this, compared with 92% of non-flushers.
- It is slightly less understood that wipes can enter the sea and rivers, and how; 82% of people nationally think this can happen. Among flushers, 58% think this can happen, compared with 86% of non-flushers.
- Many flushers believe UK sewage systems are more able to cope with wipes than other countries' systems
- It is widely believed that many different types of wipes are will disintegrate in the drains when flushed

- Most, however, do not typically think about what happens to wipes when flushed, or the broader sewage treatment system, as this is seen as someone else's responsibility
- Most believe that other people dispose of wipes in the same way as them (regardless of method of disposal), despite this rarely being discussed with friends and family

Recommendations

We recommend that the following approaches are considered for applying the insights from this research and addressing the number of wet wipes being flushed in the North West, and across the UK.

1. An immediate call to government and industry to address this, such as pushing for wet wipes to be included in a type of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) scheme, appealing for manufacturers to restrict

their use of eco-labelling, and to support this with a more prominent 'do not flush' message on the packaging of any wipes that have not met the 'fine to flush' standard.

2. Consider shorter term approaches for tackling the effects of eco-labelling, a lack of disposal instruction, and a tendency for wet wipe flushers to shift responsibility to manufacturers, such as highlighting to wipe users that these changes are being called for, raising awareness of the true 'flushability' of wipes.
3. Ensure 'do not flush' messages are clear-cut, eliminating room for interpretation. This should include communicating that any wipes, regardless of whether it says flushable, biodegradable, or anything else, cannot be flushed unless they have the 'fine to flush' logo.

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4. Consider a myth-busting-style communications campaign, using quotations from the research, combined with a clear-cut 'do not flush' message
5. Aim to make the threat of blockages real, current, and imminent. This could employ techniques such as increasing awareness of local blockages and where the source has been attributed to, and helping residents to visualise exactly where in the local system their wipes may be accumulating without their knowledge.
6. Similarly, activity to raise awareness and perceived risk of environmental issues should also explore ways to make these impacts feel more real, present and personal, reducing what is known as the 'psychological distance' of this threat. Interventions could involve using hyper-local messaging to help residents understand how their wipes could enter and damage local watercourses.
7. Any activity aimed at increasing awareness of environmental issues must also address the misunderstanding around how wet wipes can end up in marine environments and the negative perceptions of water companies this can bring, and address perceptions of 'illegal dumping' of sewage into the sea.
8. Work towards an ambition for all residents to have a bin in their bathrooms at home, emphasising the ways in which bins can be used hygienically, such as using bin liners
9. Future interventions and communications around binning wipes should be aware of or acknowledge the fact that some people would prefer to stop using some or all of their wet wipe products altogether, than having these stored in their bins at home. This group may require different approaches, such as highlighting the alternatives to wet wipe products and the benefits of these.
10. An additional charge for the removal of blockages, or potentially even the threat of this, is likely to be effective in preventing future flushing of wipes. However, if this approach is considered, it should address perceptions that this already paid for within water rates, and assumptions that it will not be possible to trace the source of a blockage to an individual property.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

The problem with wet wipes

The UK uses around 11 billion wet wipes every year¹, and the number of wet wipe products available to purchase is on the rise. As well as traditional uses such as baby wipes and multi-purpose surface cleaning wipes, products on the UK market now also include wipes for personal care, feminine hygiene, stain removal, pets, cars, glass and beauty. A brief assessment identified that all major UK supermarkets sell multiple wipe products; Sainsbury's for example sells 122 different wipe products.

In addition to the significant amounts of waste produced by these single-use, disposable products, water companies suffer ongoing issues with wet wipes being flushed down the toilet and entering the sewage system. An in-depth investigation of sewer blockages in 2017

identified that wet wipes account for 93% of the material causing blockages²; truly flushable wipes and tissue made up less than 1% of the material recovered from blockages. Wet wipes also combine with oils, fats and grease which congeal as they cool in the sewer, creating fatbergs and further adding to the issue.

Water UK predicts that there are around 300,000 sewer blockages every year, costing the UK water industry and its customers around £100 million to remove them. Following this investigation, in 2018, EDANA (industry body for 'nonwovens', including wet wipes) began to encourage its members and retailers to include a 'do not flush' logo on the front of their packaging, although this is not a mandatory requirement of members.

As well as this significant cost, blockages can lead to sewage out spills, where the water system has become clogged and requires the use of storm overflow pipes, which can lead untreated waste water into marine environments. As a result, wet wipes are the third most common litter item found on UK beaches. In their 2020 Beach Clean data, the Marine Conservation Society found an average of 18 wet wipes per 100m of coastline; a figure that has increased significantly, from 1.7 wet wipes per 100m in 2005, and 4.6 in 2010. This is a 300% increase in the number of wet wipes found, in just a decade³.

Due to the synthetic fibres and toxic chemicals that remain in most wet wipe products, this is undoubtedly having drastic negative effects on the health of our marine life and environments.

¹ Water UK, (2020), *Environmental Bill Recommendations*

² Water UK, (2017), *Wipes in Sewer Blockage Study*

³ MCS, (2020), *Great British Beach Clean 2020 Results*, accessed Oct 2021
<https://www.mcsuk.org/news/great-british-beach-clean-results-2020/>

INTRODUCTION

'Fine to Flush' standard

In 2019, the 'Fine to Flush' certification (or Water Industry Specification 4-02-06) was introduced to establish a standard for wet wipe products that can be safely flushed down the toilet. Manufacturers can have their wipes tested against stringent specifications, developed by Water UK and water testing specialists WRc, and receive the certification on passing. Tests include assessing safety of the wipe in the environment (e.g. materials and ingredients), likelihood to clear from the toilet bowl, likelihood to clear from drains, likelihood to snag in drains, and disintegration in the sewer system⁴.

Of all wet wipe products available on the UK market, it currently remains a small proportion that have met this standard; a short review of seven major UK supermarkets and retailers found 13 different 'fine to flush' products.



⁴ Water UK, (2019), *Water Industry Specification*
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INTRODUCTION

Other wipes marketed as 'flushable'

Despite the introduction of the 'fine to flush' standard, there remains a large number of wet wipe products on the market that are labelled as flushable, due to this currently being unregulated by industry body EDANA. Often, this instruction appears on the front of the packaging alongside a logo, similar to that of the 'fine to flush' certification (e.g. a blue toilet with a tick). A variety of brands and wipe types are incorrectly labelling their products as flushable, although particularly toilet tissue wipes or in the bathroom. A BBC investigation in 2018⁵ suggests that many of these wipes still available to buy today would not pass the stringent tests that would allow them to receive the 'fine to flush' label.



⁵ BBC, (2018), *No 'flushable' wet wipes tested so far pass water industry tests*, accessed Oct 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-46188354>

INTRODUCTION

Emergence of eco-labelling

A growing number of wet wipe products now also include a range of environmental claims and labels, which is a relatively new emergence within the UK wet wipe market. Some of these wipe products also contain a 'do not flush' message or symbol, although it is often smaller or less visible than the eco labels. A short desk review identified the following labels and claims on wet wipes available to purchase in UK supermarkets, other retailers, and online:

- 100% Biodegradable
- 100% Compostable
- Organic
- Plant-based
- Natural or natural fibers
- Plastic-free
- Aqua wipes (99% water)
- Water wipes (99.9% water)
- Bamboo wipes
- Eco
- Environmentally friendly
- Earth friendly



INTRODUCTION

Previous research

United Utilities and Keep Britain Tidy have long been committed to tackling these issues. In 2017, we conducted research in the North West, to understand more about the items that were being flushed down the toilet. Here it was assumed that baby wipes were the predominant cause of blockages, however the research identified that the most commonly flushed 'unflushable' item was moist toilet tissue wipes. With the significant increase in the number of wipe products available to purchase, and gaps in the evidence around what is driving flushing behaviour of these products, we believe that in order to develop effective strategies to tackle this problem, gathering more robust evidence is key.

While some research exists about the issues that wet wipes cause when they get into the system and the quantity ending up in waterways and on beaches, there are significant gaps in our

understanding about the behaviours leading them to get into the system in the first place. Specifically, gaps in the evidence base include the quantity of wipes being used by the public and what percentage of these are being flushed; the specific behavioural drivers which cause people to flush wipes; how the emergence of labels such as 'biodegradable' are and 'flushable' are affecting people's understanding of what they can do and; critically, insights into what would motivate people to change their behaviour.

Research aims & objectives

This research therefore aims to better understand flushing behaviour of wet wipes, identifying:

- the number of wipe products being used and disposed of in the UK including the quantity being flushed
- any regional differences in behaviour
- levels of awareness of the issues arising from wipes being flushed

- understanding of on-pack labels and how these and new labels such as 'biodegradable' and 'flushable' affect people's perception and behaviour
- triggers and barriers to people disposing of wipes responsibly, including whether people have bins in bathrooms
- routines and habits around wipe use and disposal (e.g. whether people bin some wipes and not others)
- practical recommendations about how to engage with the public on the issue

Ultimately, this research also aims to raise awareness and create a dialogue about this preventable issue.

METHODOLOGY

Quantitative research

A nationally representative survey was carried out online, via YouGov. The total sample size was 2,349 GB adults, aged 18+, of which 473 were from the North West Region.

Fieldwork took place in May 2021, and aimed to specifically identify:

- the extent to which wet wipes are being used and flushed, both nationally and regionally
- the types of wipes being flushed
- key attitudes and perceptions around wet wipes and disposal
- the extent to which bathroom bins are used
- key demographics of wet wipe flushers

Qualitative research

35 North West residents, who regularly flush wet wipes down the toilet, were recruited to take part in a series of online

ethnographic research tasks, over the course of five days.

Fieldwork took place in September 2021, using the online qualitative research platform, FocusVision.

Via the platform, participants submitted written accounts, photographs, and video content, and contributed to daily group discussions. This aimed to help us better understand how and why participants are using wipes, what motivates them to flush wipes down the toilet, and what is will be effective in changing behaviour.

Participants were recruited via Keep Britain Tidy's market research agency partner, Public Perspectives, using a screening questionnaire to ensure the following quotas were met:

- an even spread across the five North West counties
- a spread of United Utilities customer segments (skewing towards Busy

Parents, Cautious Families, and Here & Now, identified as being most likely to flush wipes)

- a mix of wet wipe types flushed
- a split of those who do and do not check labels
- a mix of household size
- a mix of property type
- a mix of renting and owned
- a mix of household income level
- a mix of residents from urban/suburban/rural areas
- a split of households with and without a water meter

On completion of the tasks, participants were given a cash gift of £70 as a thank you for their time. Data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify key themes arising from the research.

KEY INSIGHTS: SCALE OF THE ISSUE

USE OF WET WIPES

Nationally, 69% of adults use at least one type of wet wipe. The most commonly used are multi-purpose cleaning wipes, used by 35% of the population, followed by baby wipes, used by 27%.

Wet wipe usage in the North West is largely similar to the wider population, with some key small differences, such as increased popularity of facial wipes (22%) and bathroom cleaning wipes (17%).

Results for both GB and North West adults are shown in Table 1.

Wipe type	Nationally	North West
Multi-purpose cleaning wipes	35%	36%
Baby wipes	27%	28%
Facial cleansing/make-up removal wipes	19%	22%
Kitchen cleaning wipes	18%	19%
Moist toilet tissue wipes	17%	19%
Wet floor wipes	17%	14%
Bathroom cleaning wipes	14%	17%
Toilet cleaning wipes	11%	12%
Intimate/feminine hygiene wipes	5%	5%
Other	9%	11%
I do not use wet wipes	31%	30%

Table 1: Proportion of adults using each type of wet wipe, nationally and in North West England

Bases: GB = 2,349; NW = 473

USE OF WET WIPES

Table 2 shows differences in wet wipe usage across the five North West counties. While results are largely consistent, wet wipes are slightly less commonly used in Cumbria* and Lancashire. Greater proportions in Merseyside and Cheshire use toilet tissue wipes (29% and 25%, respectively), and use of baby wipes is highest in Cumbria and Lancashire (37% and 30%).

Wipe type	Cheshire	Cumbria	Greater Manchester	Lancashire	Merseyside
Multi-Purpose Cleaning Wipes	38%	37%	39%	34%	35%
Baby Wipes	29%	37%	24%	30%	25%
Facial Cleansing/Make-up Removal Wipes	19%	20%	21%	25%	26%
Kitchen cleaning Wipes	17%	20%	19%	19%	21%
Moist toilet tissue wipes	25%	17%	17%	15%	29%
Wet Floor Wipes	10%	23%	10%	15%	26%
Bathroom cleaning Wipes	17%	14%	16%	16%	16%
Toilet Cleaning Wipes	13%	9%	12%	10%	13%
Other	8%	9%	11%	10%	13%
Intimate/Feminine Hygiene Wipes	4%	0%	7%	5%	7%
I do not use wet wipes	31%	26%	31%	26%	32%

Table 2: Proportion of adults using each wipe type, across North West counties

Bases: Cheshire = 72; Cumbria = 35*; Greater Manchester = 164; Lancashire = 106; Merseyside = 68

*Results for Cumbria must be treated as indicative due to sample size of <50

FLUSHING WET WIPES

Proportion of 'flushers' nationally

Overall, around one in six people (17%) nationally flush wet wipes down the toilet. Looking at regions separately, Scotland has the greatest proportion of 'flushers' (22%), and in the North West, one in five residents (20%) flush at least one type of wet wipe down the toilet.

Occurrence of flushing is lowest in the South West of England, with fewer than one in 10 people (9%) flushing wet wipes down the toilet. Results are shown in Figure 1.

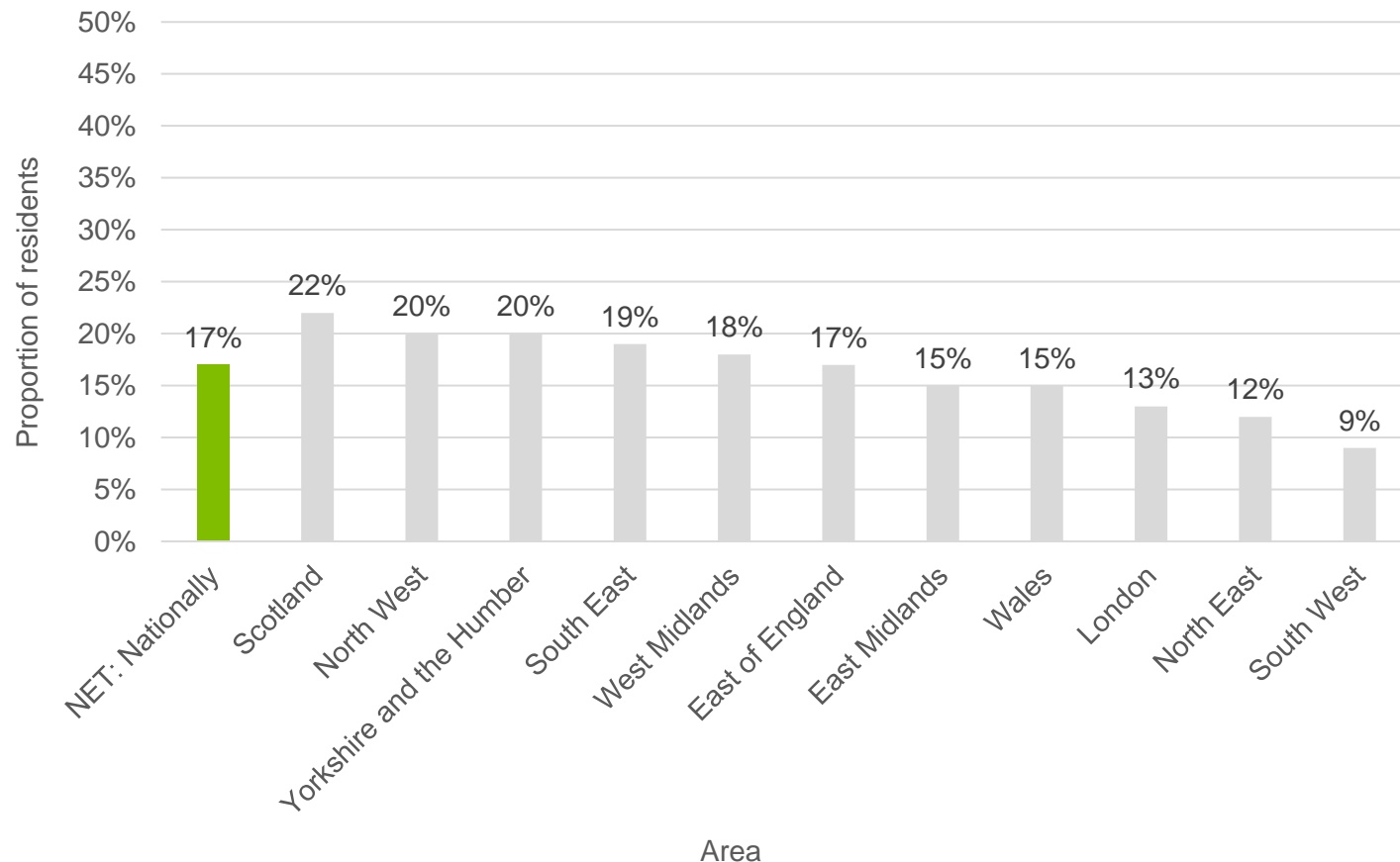


Figure 1: Proportion of adults flushing wipes nationally and across GB regions

Bases: GB = 2349; Scotland = 181; NW = 473; Y&H = 164; SE = 291; WM = 173; EoE = 209; Wales = 119; London = 292; NE = 97; SW = 197

FLUSHING WET WIPES

Proportion of 'flushers' in the North West

Comparing prevalence of flushing behaviour across North West counties, it is highest in Cheshire (28% of the population flush at least one type of wipe), followed by Merseyside (25%). Flushing is lowest in Lancashire, at 13% of the population. Results are shown in Figure 2.

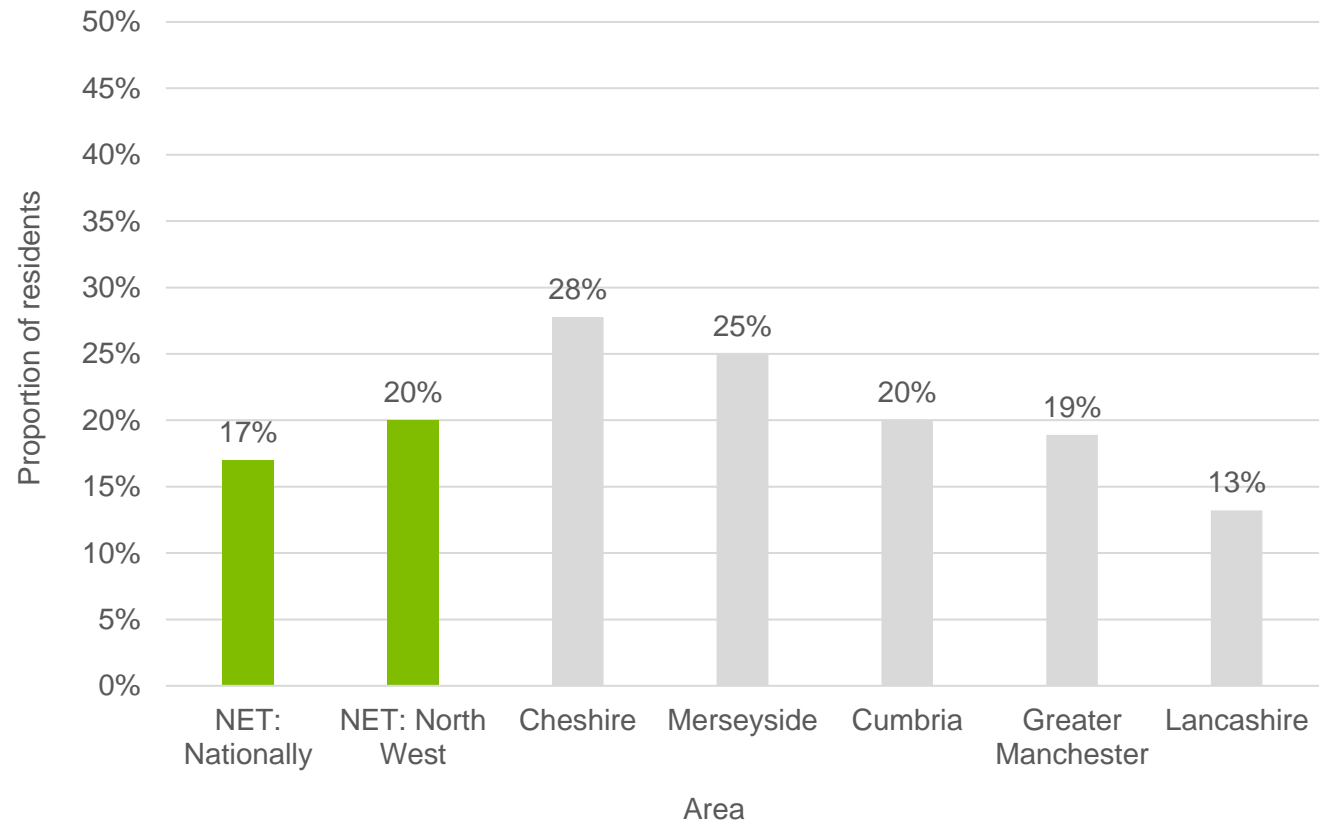


Figure 2: Proportion of adults flushing wipes nationally, in the North West, and across North West counties
Bases: GB = 2349; NW = 473; Cheshire = 72; Cumbria = 35*; Greater Manchester = 164; Lancashire = 106; Merseyside = 68

*Results for Cumbria must be treated as indicative due to sample size of <50

FLUSHING WET WIPES

The tables below outline the extent to which different wipe types are being flushed down the toilet, as a proportion of the whole population (Table 3) and as a proportion of those who use that wipe type only (Table 4). Results are shown for all GB adults, the North West, and across North West counties.

These results indicate that the most commonly flushed are toilet tissue wipes (13% nationally flush these, and 16% in the North West), followed by other wipes used for bathroom purposes, such as toilet cleaning wipes (3% both nationally and in the North West), and feminine hygiene wipes (1% nationally and 2% in the North West).

Looking at results among those who use the different wipe types only, we can see that the majority of people using toilet tissue wipes dispose of them by flushing them down the toilet (75% nationally and 81% in the North West). This decreases

for toilet cleaning wipes (27% nationally and 42% in the North West) and feminine hygiene wipes (24% nationally and 25% in the North West).

When taking into account the size of these national and regional populations, as well as the number of different wipe types being flushed, these results demonstrate there are hugely significant amounts of wipes being flushed down toilets and entering the sewage and water treatment system in the UK.

FLUSHING WET WIPES

Proportion of people who flush each wet wipe type down the toilet, of all adults

Wipe type	NET: Nationally	NET: North West	Cheshire	Cumbria*	Greater Manchester	Lancashire	Merseyside
Moist toilet tissue wipes	13%	16%	21%	17%	15%	9%	22%
Toilet cleaning wipes	3%	3%	3%	0%	4%	1%	3%
Intimate/feminine hygiene wipes	1%	2%	1%	0%	3%	0%	6%
Bathroom cleaning wipes	1%	1%	4%	0%	1%	0%	3%
Multi-purpose cleaning wipes	1%	1%	4%	0%	1%	1%	0%
Facial cleansing/make-up removal wipes	1%	1%	0%	3%	1%	1%	0%
Baby wipes	1%	1%	1%	0%	1%	1%	0%
Wet floor wipes	0.3%	0.4%	0%	0%	1%	0%	1%
Kitchen cleaning wipes	0.2%	0.2%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%
Other	0.1%	0.4%	0%	0%	1%	1%	0%

Table 3: Proportion of adults flushing each wipe type, nationally, in the North West, and across North West counties

Bases: GB = 2349; NW = 473; Cheshire = 72; Cumbria = 35*; Greater Manchester = 164; Lancashire = 106; Merseyside = 68

*Results for Cumbria must be treated as indicative due to sample size of <50

FLUSHING WET WIPES

Proportion of people who flush each wet wipe type down the toilet, of those who use them

Wipe type	NET: Nationally	NET: North West	Cheshire	Cumbria	Greater Manchester	Lancashire	Merseyside
Moist toilet tissue wipes	75%	81%	83%	100%	86%	63%	75%
Toilet cleaning wipes	24%	25%	33%	-	42%	0%	80%
Intimate/feminine hygiene wipes	27%	42%	22%	0%	32%	9%	22%
Bathroom cleaning wipes	4%	8%	25%	0%	4%	0%	18%
Multi-purpose cleaning wipes	3%	4%	0%	14%	3%	4%	0%
Facial cleansing/make-up removal wipes	3%	3%	11%	0%	3%	3%	0%
Baby wipes	4%	3%	0%	0%	6%	9%	0%
Wet floor wipes	2%	3%	0%	0%	6%	0%	6%
Kitchen cleaning wipes	1%	1%	5%	0%	3%	3%	0%
Other	1%	3%	0%	0%	3%	0%	0%

Table 4: Proportion of adults flushing each wipe type, nationally, in the North West, and across North West counties – of those who use wet wipes
Bases: GB = 399; NW = 89; North West county figures are based on sample sizes below 50 and should therefore be treated as indicative only

FLUSHING WET WIPES

Frequency of flushing wipes

Table 5 below shows the average number of wipes flushed down the toilet per person, per week, of those who say they flush that type of wipe. As many of these results are based on low sample sizes, these are only indicative.

However, they do indicate that there are certain wipes that appear to be flushed more than once a day, on average, such as baby wipes, feminine hygiene wipes, and toilet tissue wipes; others that appear to be flushed most days, such as make-up wipes and toilet cleaning wipes; and some that are flushed a couple of times per week, such as floor wipes, kitchen cleaning wipes, and bathroom cleaning wipes.

These results also help to demonstrate the scale of the issue. For instance, of the approximately 52 million adults in the UK, 27% use baby wipes (shown in Table 1), and 4% of those flush them (shown in Table 4). If these are flushing an average of 10 wipes per week, this

equates to 297 million baby wipes being flushed in the UK each year. Combining these results for each wipe type, this equates to 4.2 billion wipes being flushed in the UK every year. Of the 11 billion wipes used in the UK every year, this indicates that 39% are being flushed down the toilet.

Table 5 also shows these figures for the North West, based on the proportions of residents using each wipe type in this region, and the proportions of those who flush them. This estimates that more than half a billion wipes (570 million) are being flushed down toilets in the North West each year; 13% of all wipes flushed in the UK.

FLUSHING WET WIPES

Wipe type	Average number of wipes flushed per week by those flushing them	Estimated number of wipes flushed per year in UK ⁶	Estimated number of wipes flushed per year in the North West
Baby wipes	10*	297,030,487	25,316,382
Intimate/ feminine hygiene wipes	10*	371,288,109	63,290,955
Moist toilet tissue wipes	8	2,805,287,934	371,065,828
Multi-purpose cleaning wipes	8*	231,023,712	34,719,610
Facial cleansing/ make-up removal wipes	6*	94,059,654	11,934,866
Toilet cleaning wipes	5	363,037,262	45,207,825
Wet floor wipes	2*	18,701,920	2,531,638
Kitchen cleaning wipes	2*	9,901,016	1,145,265
Bathroom cleaning wipes	2*	30,803,162	8,197,686
Other	7*	17,326,778	6,962,005
		Estimated UK total = 4.2 billion	Estimated North West total = 570 million

⁶ Figures are based on estimated adult (age 18+) populations of 52,890,044 (UK), and 5,795,875 (North West); ONS, (2021) *Estimates of the population for the UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, Mid-2020 dataset*

Table 5: Average number of wipes flushed per person, per week, of those who ever flush wipes

**Results must be treated as indicative due to sample sizes of <50*



KEY INSIGHTS: WHO IS FLUSHING WIPES

'FLUSHER' DEMOGRAPHICS

Age and gender

Of all flushers nationally, 59% are female, and 41% male. 19% of all women flush wipes down the toilet, and 15% of all men.

In the North West, women make up two thirds of flushers (66%), and 34% are men. Of all women in the region, a quarter (25%) flush wipes, compared with 15% of men.

Looking at age, as shown in Figure 3, all age groups nationally are fairly equally likely to flush wet wipes down the toilet, although this is slightly higher in older age groups.

In the North West, those aged between 25 and 34 are most likely flush wipes, with a quarter (25%) of this age group doing so.

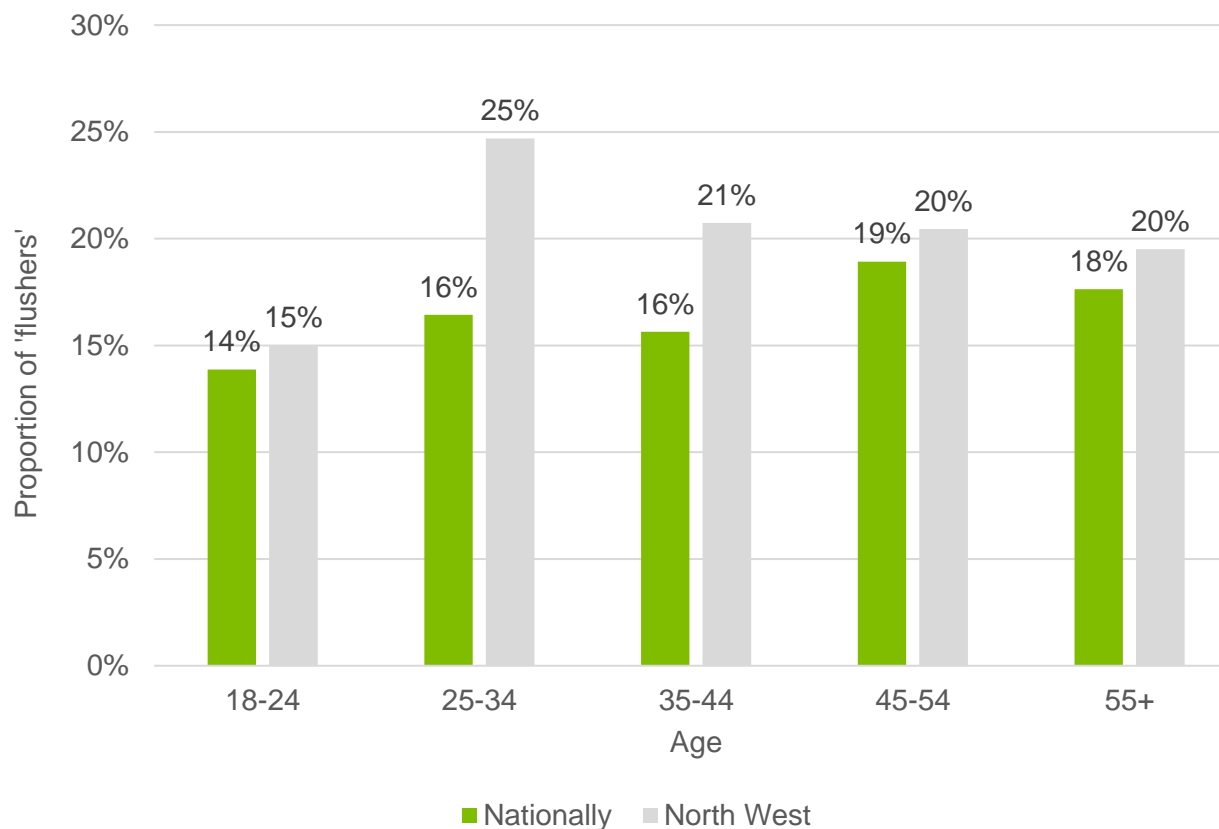


Figure 3: Proportion of each age group who flush wet wipes, nationally and in the North West
 Bases nationally: 18-24 = 209; 25-34 = 371; 35-44 = 403; 45-54 = 391; 55+ = 975
 Bases North West: 18-24 = 40; 25-34 = 81; 35-44 = 82; 45-54 = 88; 55+ = 164

'FLUSHER' DEMOGRAPHICS

The following results look at the demographics of flushers among certain wipe types.

Moist toilet tissue wipes

Looking at toilet tissue wipes specifically, women make up the larger proportion of flushers of these wipes (62% are women, compared with 38% of men). They are also more likely to be from older age groups; 65% are aged 45 or older (46% aged 55+ and 19% aged 45 to 54).

Those with and without children (under 18 years) are equally likely to flush these wipes, with around 75% of both groups doing so.

Toilet cleaning wipes

Of those who flush toilet cleaning wipes, the greater proportion are men; 55% are men and 45% are women. These flushers are predominantly from older age groups, with 47% aged 55+, and a quarter (26%) are aged 45 to 54.

Baby wipes

Flushers of these wipes are only slightly more likely to be parents; 54% have children and 46% do not. They are predominantly women (71%, compared to 29% men), and they are most likely to be aged 55+ (33%), 25 to 34 (29%), and 18 to 24 (21%).

KEY INSIGHTS: PURCHASING WET WIPES

PURCHASING WET WIPES

Motivations for using wet wipes

Based on insights gathered from the qualitative phase of this research, wet wipes, regardless of their purpose, are seen to provide a convenient and hygienic solution to household cleaning and personal care. Many participants view wet wipes as an essential product, necessary for maintaining cleanliness at home. Household cleaning wipes, for instance, are often viewed as the more hygienic option, compared to a 'traditional' spray and cloth.

Similarly, toilet tissue wipes are seen as providing an extra clean feeling, compared with simply using toilet paper alone. When asked how they would feel if they could no longer buy toilet tissue wipe products, many suggested they would look for an alternative way of getting this additional clean, such as bidets, rather than just reverting back to only using toilet paper.

"I find them convenient to use and probably the most hygienic way to clean the toilet seat and surrounding areas of the toilets in my home."

Alison

"If wet wipes weren't available I would have to go back to the spray and clean method, which in my opinion isn't as hygienic." Mal

"I consider toilet and baby wipes essential for hygiene." Angelica

"I buy them because they give me a more clean feeling than toilet tissue alone. If I ever run out I moisten some regular toilet tissue to mimic wet wipes. Not as good, but the next best thing." Jody

"If they were no longer available I would consider the spray that you spray onto toilet tissue instead." Greg

PURCHASING WET WIPES

Shopping habits

Participants reported typically shopping for their wet wipes alongside their groceries and other household essentials. This is generally either in the supermarket as part of a bigger shop, or elsewhere where cleaning and household products, including wet wipes, are purchased separately to groceries, such as 'Home Bargains' or similar discount stores. Some shop for their wet wipes online, either in an online grocery order or from 'Amazon', or other retailers where they can be purchased in bulk.

Some participants suggested they have loyalty to specific brands of wipes, as these have been tried and tested over time. The majority buy based on price, and other factors such as 'flushability' environmental credentials, fragrance, and ingredients (e.g. anti-bacterial, for sensitive skin, 99.9% water). Some participants mentioned other factors, such as thickness of the wipes, and packaging that can be easily resealed for

freshness, as being key for them in their purchasing decision making.

"When looking to buy flushable wet wipes I typically shop online, Amazon being the best place, I can bulk buy and have it delivered at a reasonable cost on a bi-monthly basis." Gavin

"Being flushable and good for the environment are important but often these are more expensive so I can't buy them." Angelica

"I buy wipes that are on offer in the shop, although if there is a brand that is environmentally conscious and not too expensive I will also buy these."
Louise B

"I went to Asda to buy these wipes because I read about them, that they are safe to flush down the toilet."
Waheeda



KEY INSIGHTS: DRIVERS OF FLUSHING BEHAVIOUR

PACKAGING AND LABELS

Eco-labelling is leading to wipes being flushed, despite 'do not flush' symbols on packaging

Looking at survey results from all those who use wet wipes, 1 in 5 (19%) say they use wipes labelled as biodegradable because they trust that these are fine to flush down the toilet. In this North West, this is similar, at 18%.

A similar proportion, 14%, also say they use wipes labelled as 'eco' or 'environmentally friendly' because they trust these are fine to flush down the toilet. This figure is the same in the North West (14%).

Discussions in the qualitative research supported this, with participants suggesting labelling such as "biodegradable", "plant fibres", "plant based", "compostable", and "organic" can make them more likely to flush a wipe down the toilet, as they feel it is fine to do so. This is often regardless of the presence of 'do not flush' symbols.

"With my bathroom wipes I only buy biodegradable plant-based ones as I know I will mainly put these in the toilet so I don't feel too bad." Neesha

*"If a wipe is from a naturally derived product why can't it be flushed?"
Neesha*

"The Ajax plant based wipes says that they are biodegradable and compostable, so most people would think that's okay to flush." Julie A

*"If it says flushable, biodegradable or organic, I am more likely to flush it."
Angelica*



PACKAGING AND LABELS

There is a lack of (clear) disposal information on packaging

Participants suggested that when they are looking for disposal instructions on their wet wipes, this information can either be hidden, unclear, or missing completely. Participants explained this often causes them to use their own judgements to decide whether or not to flush that wipe type. Many suggested this information should be made clearer and more prominent on packaging.

For instance, Kimberley's bathroom and toilet wipes, which she flushes down the toilet, have disposal instructions on the back of the packaging, in small print font, along with other directions for use. These instructions say the bathroom wipes should not be flushed, but the toilet wipes can.

“Some wipes do not disclose whether or not you can flush them. If they do not distinctly say you can't flush them then I would compare the material of the wipe with flushable ones and make my own judgment.” Louis

“If you can't flush then the packaging needs to make this known more clearly instead of a small line at the bottom of the instructions.” Kimberley

“The Cif Power and Shine should definitely have a logo on the front telling (you) not to flush, it seems as though they've hidden that information so it isn't clear.” Julie A

“My baby wipes are littered with award logos so it's harder to separate the important information from the selling points.” Maria



PACKAGING AND LABELS

Eco-labelling is combined with a lack of disposal information

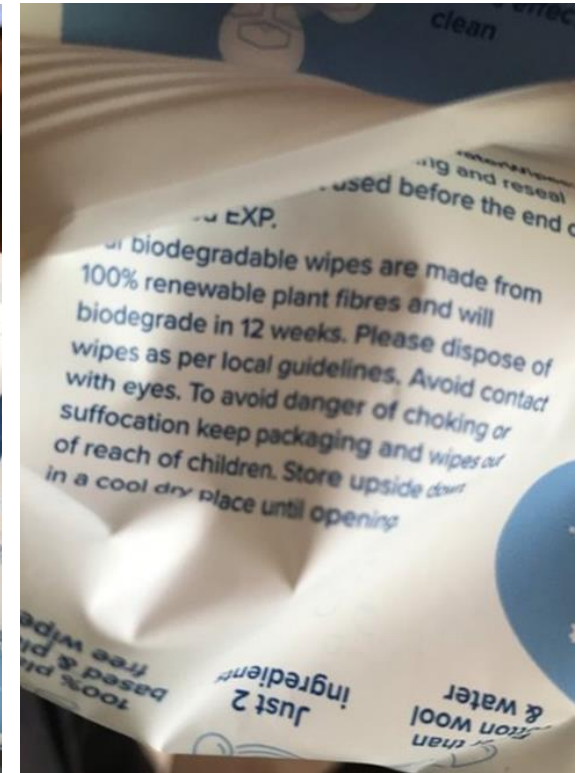
Often, an absence of (obvious) disposal instruction and an often very prominent presence 'biodegradable' or other eco labelling are working together to further drive flushing behaviour.

This is the case for William, whose Water Wipes, which he regularly flushes down the toilet, are labelled as “the world’s purest baby wipes”, “100% biodegradable”, and “99.9% water”.

“The water wipes, which are probably the most used in the house are biodegradable, made from plant fibres, and I cannot see anything on the packaging to say don’t flush.”

William

“I take biodegradable to mean flushable.” William



PACKAGING AND LABELS

Many wet wipe users do not look at labels at all

Out of those wet wipe users surveyed, 1 in 10 (11%) do not check the labels on wipes at all. This is similar in the North West (13%). These wipe users are typically more focused on factors such as price, wipe type, fragrance, or always purchase the same wipes and therefore feel they do not need to look at packaging, as is the case for Helene who purchases 'Huggies' baby wipes for multiple uses around her home.

Interestingly, survey respondents who say they flush wipes down the toilet are slightly more likely to check the labels on wipes, with only 7% saying they don't do this. This is slightly lower still among North West 'flushers' (5%). This could provide support to findings from the qualitative data that wet wipe packaging and labels may be driving some to flush their wipes

"I only use the Huggies in the bathroom for my face, the toilet, and wiping round. I don't look at the label [for] how to dispose, I just throw them down the toilet." Helene

"I never look for logos when buying wipes I don't even check the instructions, all I'm looking for is what the wipes is actually for, whether there's a fragrance and I'm normally swayed by attractive packaging."

Julie A

"I don't bother looking at labels etc. I know what they do so I buy them, generally on price." Daniel



WIPE TYPE AND USE

Any wipes used in the bathroom are more likely to be flushed

Any wipes used in place of or in addition to toilet paper, or those used for feminine hygiene, are seen to be more hygienic to flush than to dispose of in a household bin. This is often also the case for any wipes used to clean the toilet or bathroom; it is seen as more hygienic to flush these rather than bin them, as suggested by Gillian and Julie, whose bathrooms and wipes can be seen in the images here.

It is often assumed that wipes used for these purposes are 'flushable', regardless of whether this is stated on the packaging.

"I buy five packs of antibacterial wipes per month. I use these for every day cleaning. They are used in the bathroom and I like to dispose of them in the toilet to stop germs." Gillian

"If I left the bathroom with a dirty wipe in my hand I'd feel as if I was transferring germs from one room to the next. When it's a bathroom cleaning wipe you presume it's flushable." Julie A

"I do not want to carry these dirty wipes downstairs to the kitchen bin. I just don't feel right putting a wipe I used to clean the bathroom or toilet in my kitchen bin due to the possible germs." Neesha



WIPE TYPE AND USE

Any wipes used in the bathroom are more likely to be flushed

Flushing can also occur simply due to proximity to the bathroom. It is seen as easier and much more convenient to dispose of any wipe used in or near the bathroom, down the toilet, rather than in a bin which is likely further away, requiring more effort. It is for this reason some wet wipe flushers report deciding how to dispose of their wipes based on where they are in the house, as is the case for Michael, whose cleansing wipes are shown here.

“I use wipes out of the bathroom too, polish wipes for example and antibac in the kitchen, these do go in the bin rather than down the toilet. It’s only face wipes and bathroom wipes that do go down the toilet.” Michael

“Depending where I am when I use my make-up wipes depends where it goes; in the bathroom down the toilet, in the bedroom in the bin.” Kimberley

“If I am in the kitchen I will put them in the bin, I only put them down the loo if I am in the bathroom.” Daniel



WIPE TYPE AND USE

Dirtier wipes are more likely to be flushed

Some participants suggested that they decide how to dispose of their wipes depending on what the wipe has been used to clean, and how soiled and dirty it is afterwards. This was often talked about in relation to toilet tissue wipes, or cleaning up mess from children. It is seen as preferable to flush these wipes in order to avoid having messy or smelly wipes in their bins at home.

“If it is a non-flushable baby wipe which has been soiled I will still flush this, as it is a more sanitary way to get rid of them as opposed to having them in an internal bin.” Louis

“Toilet bins can get very dirty and are not pleasant to clean, so I would like to avoid putting "soiled" items into them as it will make it disgusting to clean and will make the bathroom smell.” Alex

***“I decide on how to dispose (of) the wet wipe depending on what I have used it to clean. If it is too soiled or nasty, I will prefer flushing them to avoid the spread of bacteria and unpleasant smells in the house.”
Ngufor***

WIPE TYPE AND USE

Thicker, bigger wipes are seen as less flushable

Some participants suggested that they are less likely to flush wipes which seem thicker, such as some cleaning and floor wipes, due to a perception that these are more likely to cause blockages in their drains.

“I do tend to think twice about flushing the Dettol ones because they are so large and tough. I could see these types being an issue with potential blockages... That’s not to say I’ve never flushed any of them down the loo. I might occasionally flush a single one away especially if it is looking a bit gross.” William

“I’m more likely to flush thinner weaker feeling wet wipes such as baby wipes but more sturdy wipes like floor wipes and kitchen wipes I avoid flushing due to them just feeling like they could clog something up.” Alex



WIPE TYPE AND USE

Having fewer wipes to dispose of at once makes some more likely to flush

Some participants explained that they would be more likely to bin wipes when they had a few to get rid of at once, for instance if they have used lots of wipes for a bigger cleaning job. Participants suggested this was typically in order to avoid blockages in their drains.

William, for example, explained that he would dispose of bathroom cleaning wipes in the kitchen bin if there were lots to get rid of at once, but in the image shown here from William's video where he used two wipes to clean the bathroom, these were considered few enough to flush. This is compared to Norma, who will bin wipes if she has more than one to dispose of at the same time.

“If I was cleaning the bathroom and used a lot of wipes, especially the bigger ones, then I would probably take them downstairs and put [them] in the kitchen bin.” William

“If I have used more than one, if I have two or three at the same time, I would tend to bin rather than flush.” Norma



WIPE TYPE AND USE

Other wipes are being used in place of toilet tissue wipes due to perceived cost saving and quality

Some participants suggested they often substitute wipes that are typically marketed as flushable wipes, such as toilet tissue wipes, for non-flushable alternatives that can do the same job. Typically, baby wipes are used in place of these.

This can often be due to baby wipes being a cheaper alternative to toilet wipes, as is the case for Alex, whose baby wipes are shown here, or due to them being perceived as better quality or thickness, as is the case for Helene.

“If I’m buying toilet wipes... I tend to buy whatever is working out cheapest per wipe so usually some form of baby wipe. We go through a pack very fast and buying lots can end up quite expensive.” Alex

“It didn’t say mine are flushable but I’ve tried flushable wipes in the past and they’re not as thick.” Helene



CONTEXT, HABITS AND ROUTINES

Not having a bathroom bin is driving flushing behaviour for some

1 in 5 people (20%) nationally don't have a bin in their bathroom. In the North West this is similar (19%). For many participants without bins in their bathrooms, flushing wipes is therefore seen as the more convenient and hygienic option, compared with disposing of wipes used in the bathroom, elsewhere in the house. Many feel concerned that carrying dirty wipes from one room to the next could spread germs throughout the house.

However, the proportion of people without bathroom bins is the same among 'flushers' of wipes nationally (20%), and is less in the North West (15%). This finding suggests that a lack of a bathroom bin is not necessarily driving flushing behaviour overall. Many participants suggested that the presence of their bathroom bins, although can sometimes lead to binning wipes, does

not always do so. For instance, when the wipe is particularly dirty or considered unhygienic, some will prefer to flush. Others suggested bathroom bins are often small and quick to fill up, and they therefore try to minimise the amount of rubbish they dispose of in them.



*“I don't have a bin in my bathroom upstairs so when cleaning the upstairs bathroom, rather than bring all the wipes down, I flush them so I'm not carrying them through the house.”
Kimberley*

“I don't have a bin in the bathroom so it's more convenient for me to flush them.” Gillian

“The nearest bin to my bathroom is in my bedroom and I couldn't stand the thought of dirty wipes in the bin when I'm in bed, I'd feel like I was breathing in germs if I'd forgotten to empty the bin.” Julie A

“The bathroom bin is very small and fills up quickly. It's also a fuff to empty due to the way it's shaped.” Angelica

CONTEXT, HABITS AND ROUTINES

Flushing can be dependent on what else is going on at the time

Some participants explained that how they dispose a wet wipe can often depend on what else is going on at home, or in the moment, at the time. For instance, participants discussed looking after a baby or children, being busy or distracted, or even the time of day (and therefore when they will take their bins outside) as being factors that could sometimes lead them to flushing a wipe rather than binning it.

“I will probably always flush down the toilet when I'm with the baby because he wants to grab everything else so it's easier to flush.” Carol

“At night I am more likely to flush the wipes down than during the day, as I don't tend to take my rubbish out at night. During the day, if I know I'll be taking my rubbish out I am more likely to put the wipes in the bin.” Angelica

“I usually clean the bathroom after I've had my shower so it's easier to flush than take them downstairs.” Gillian

Some continue flushing as this is what they have always done

For some, flushing wet wipes is something they have done for years, often without much thought or consideration, and has therefore become habitual. These participants explained that it is for this reason they carry on flushing wipes now.

“I normally flush my wet wipes, this is something I have done since I was a teenager.” Angelica

“If they've been used for "toilet" purposes, they get flushed. We've used them for years, probably long before any concerns about flushing them, and just treated them as another version of toilet paper.” Chris

“How I get rid of them is a habit more than a design. If I'm in the bathroom most things go down the toilet. I guess the toilet is my bathroom waste disposal.” Michael

CONTEXT, HABITS AND ROUTINES

Overall, flushing is easy, quick, convenient and the wipe is no longer ‘my problem’

Overall, the majority of participants are motivated to flush wipes down the toilet due to it being an easier and more convenient way to dispose of them, compared to binning. Many suggested that flushing is preferable as it means the wipe is dealt with quickly, it is “mess-free”, and no longer their problem. As explained by Michael, for instance, convenience is something that sways him to flush each time, despite awareness that he should avoid flushing wipes.

“I guess I’m conscious about flushing them down the toilet, and should dispose of them another way, but convenience of them just going and being forgotten about sways me each time.” Michael

“Flushing wipes straight down the loo is a very convenient mess-free way of disposal.” Rachael

“Some baby wipes say do not flush but it's easier to just flush.” Carol

“Because I generally use them in the bathroom it is too easy to just flush them down loo.” Daniel

“I have two young boys and a husband who all use the wipes. They aren’t the most tidy people I know, so I much prefer being able to flush them away than deal with the mess of them putting them in a bin.” Victoria

AWARENESS, ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

Most have an inkling that flushing wipes is wrong

The majority of participants are aware, to some extent, that wipes (either some, all or most) should not be flushed down the toilet. Many of these explained that they can often feel guilty when flushing wipes down the toilet, particularly if they are labelled as non-flushable wipes, due to concerns that they may be contributing to blockages in drains or environmental issues.

Some participants said that for this reason, they try not to flush too many non-flushable wipes down the toilet, and will either only flush one wipe at a time, or only flush them on some occasions, and put them in a bin the rest of the time.

“I do occasionally feel guilty as I know they will be having a detrimental impact somewhere along the line.”

Victoria

“I worry slightly that there will be a blockage or they take so long to break down but I try not to use too many to avoid this.” Gillian

“I only flush a few baby wipes, not all, because of fear of clogging the pipeline.” Roma

AWARENESS, ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

However, some wet wipe users can easily put this out their mind

Despite some awareness or feelings of guilt that flushing wipes is the wrong thing to do, some participants explained that they can easily put this out their mind in the moment of disposal, and other more persuasive factors encourage them to flush wipes down the toilet. For instance, this is the case for Kimberley, who sometimes recalls a United Utilities radio advert she heard about wipes causing blockages, but decides to flush her wipes based on convenience and hygiene.

“Recently I have heard a local radio advert for United Utilities saying about wipes blocking drains... When I flush them I don’t give it a second thought as I just treat them like toilet paper most of the time...occasionally I will remember the ad about flushing wipes and be like ‘oops I should (have) put them in the bin’. But flushing is just so

much more hygienic and more convenient especially if you have just wiped the toilet down etc.” Kimberley

“I occasionally think about a news report I saw on the TV a few years ago about the water company having issues caused by wipes further downstream in the sewers. I feel slightly guilty that I might be contributing to this but generally just dismiss it from my mind.” Chris

“I do feel slightly guilty if they weren’t flushable ones but sometimes you have no choice... it does feel that when you flush them that it’s no longer your problem, even though you know it may cause blockages in the system.” Gavin

AWARENESS, ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

Some have never thought twice about flushing wipes

For some, flushing wipes is not something they have ever considered as being the 'wrong' thing to do. Many in this group assume there is no issue at all with flushing wipes as, for instance, they do not look at labels and therefore do not see 'do not flush' messages', and/or are not aware of any negative consequences of flushing wipes down the toilet.

Some participants in this group are aware that flushing wipes can be considered 'wrong' and are aware there can be issues, but feel that they are exempt from this in some way. Often this is a perception that their drains can cope with wipes being flushed, as they are not aware of this causing any issues in the past.

"I don't see any problem with putting them down the loo. I don't feel bad at all." Daniel

"I don't see it as a problem if you're in the bathroom." Helene

"There are no disadvantages to me flushing wipes down the toilet as our infrastructure seems to cope... my toilet has never got blocked in 20 years (of) flushing the wipes, think it depends on the plumbing." Norma

"If I'm in the bathroom I will flush most wipes and don't look at the labels. Even if I did I would ignore the 'don't flush'. Never had a problem with blockages and not aware of any in the street... We have never had an issue flushing them away but our bathroom drain is very high and I live on top of a hill. This coupled with no water use restrictions i.e. no water meter means I'm confident they are getting flushed into the main sewer which is a large new system due to recent upgrade and replacement." William

AWARENESS, ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

Others will strictly only flush wipes labelled as 'flushable'

3 out of 10 people (29% nationally and 30% in the North West) use wipes labelled as flushable because they trust that these are fine to flush down the toilet. Typically this labelling is very trusted, and participants suggested they would feel angry and misled if they learned that flushable wipes went on to cause issues.

When discussing 'flushable' labelling, some participants explained they ensure they only flush wipes that are clearly labelled as 'flushable', as they are aware that other wipes not labelled as such can go on to cause blockages and environmental damage if disposed of down the toilet.

"I only flush wipes that clearly say they are flushable. If a product states that it was not flushable I definitely wouldn't flush it. I also wouldn't put a wipe down the toilet if the packaging didn't state whether it was flushable or not... I would feel upset and misled [if flushable wipes cause issues] because I only flush wipes away when I believe they are flushable." Alison

"For me to flush a wet wipe down the toilet, the packaging definitely has to clearly state that they are flush-friendly. If this information is missing, I won't purchase them for toilet use... If a wet wipe I'd used caused this problem [blockages or ending up in seas or rivers], I'd be really disappointed and a bit upset, feeling like I'd been betrayed by the company selling the wipes, as I only buy biodegradable and so would feel lied to." Jody

"As long as the tissues do what they are supposed to do and they are okay to flush that is all that I am interested in from the packaging... I know that if non-flushable wipes are put down the toilet it can cause problems for the water board with blockages." Dave

AWARENESS, ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

A minority of people doubt 'flushable' labelling

Although this labelling is generally trusted on the whole, there is a minority of people who question the true 'flushability' of these wipes and what actually happens to them once they are flushed. Often, however, this doubt is not enough to prevent people from buying these wipes, and flushing them.

"Sometimes I do feel a bit guilty as I know that even most "flushable" wipes still cause problems down the line." Alex

"I still feel that [flushable] wipes are not 100% flushable despite the packaging but it has become the norm to use them in my family. I would be upset if these were causing an environmental issues and less likely to trust people selling flushable wipes." Lee

"I feel some hesitation about buying them [toilet tissue wet wipes] because I worry about the effect they may have on plumbing and on the sewer infrastructure. A video by the YouTube channel Practical Engineering showed me that at least some flushable wipes don't disintegrate like toilet paper does, potentially causing blockages." John

AWARENESS, ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

There is awareness that wipes can potentially lead to blockages, at some point along the sewage system

Nine out of 10 adults (88% nationally and 90% in the North West) think that wet wipes flushed down the toilet can cause blockages. Among flushers, a smaller but still significant majority think this will happen (66% nationally and 75% in the North West). Only one in 10 flushers (10%) don't think this will cause blockages, and a quarter are unsure (24%).

These findings are supported by those of the qualitative discussions with flushers, which indicated that many participants are aware that flushing wipes can potentially lead to blockages, *in some way*. For some participants, this is a vague understanding that their own toilet or drains could get blocked; for others, they are aware of the potential for blockages in the wider sewage system. Some have a greater awareness of

exactly how this can occur. For instance, a number of participants talked about wipes becoming caught on something in the drains (e.g. rough pipes or metal grids), trapping other items in turn, and this being the cause of the blockage. This awareness is often either due to a personal experience of blockages, hearing about it from family or friends, or learning about this in the news and media.

However, as previously mentioned, there are some who are completely unaware of this potential consequence and have never considered this before now.

“The downside of flushing wipes is not only can they clog up the sewer system, but sometimes clogs up the toilet in general leading to needing to reach in and pull out the blockage.”

Alex

“I wouldn't like to flush baby wipes as I have a friend who did this, it blocked the drains, cost a bomb to sort it too.”

Mal

“Oh gosh this [blockages] is something I've not thought of.”

Caroline

“Good point about the toilet getting blocked, this isn't something I have considered.” Angelica

AWARENESS, ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

It is slightly less understood that wipes can enter the sea and rivers, and how

82% of all GB adults (and 85% of North West residents) think that wet wipes flushed down the toilet can end up in seas, rivers or on beaches. Among flushers, 58% think this can happen, compared with 86% of non-flushers. For North West flushers, 68% think this could occur, compared with 90% of non-flushers in the region. These results suggest that it is slightly less understood how wipes, when flushed, can lead to environmental issues, and that this lack of awareness is driving flushing behaviour.

These results are also reflected in the qualitative findings; when asked to discuss any potential consequences of flushing wipes, participants were less likely to mention wipes entering marine environments and more likely to discuss blockages. Of those participants who are aware that this can sometimes occur,

many are unsure on why or how this is happening.

Some, however, did have a greater understanding of how wipes can enter marine environments, mentioning water companies' use of combined sewer outflow pipes, and the damage that wipes can cause when they enter these environments. Often, participants reporting hearing this information in news reports or on television.

“I do know it ends up polluting the planet but how is all this sewage just ending up not in sewage works? Or are they not disposing correctly? I don't know.” Rachael

“I'm not exactly sure if they're bad for the environment? There's something inside me that feels guilty for throwing them down.” Waheeda

“Some brands use plastic in flushable wipes it never decomposes... it releases microplastics into our

***waterways and our food system.”
Roma***

“I remember seeing information on the news then half watched a BBC documentary on illegal overflow of sewage. If too much sewage comes into treatment plant they are allowed to just release it without cleaning the water.” Lee

“I think sometimes it goes down the sewers to the sewage works, where it is treated as part of the solid waste. I think that other times, the water company doesn't treat it, but just pumps it into rivers or the sea along with other solid waste that it doesn't have the capacity to treat.” Chris

AWARENESS, ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

Many believe UK sewage systems are more able to cope with wipes than other countries

There is a fairly strong perception among wipe flushers that drain and sewer systems in the UK are more sophisticated and robust than in other countries, making them more able to cope with wet wipes being flushed. Some participants suggested that they would avoid flushing wet wipes in other countries, but would do this at home, with participants believing issues caused by wipes to be less likely to occur here than in other countries.

“I think in some countries the plumbing may not be as advanced as ours so disposing of them in the toilet would cause issues.” Gillian

“I think I would be more inclined to bin used wipes in other countries as the plumbing is not always good.” Norma

“I think our sanitary units are more sophisticated than abroad.” Caroline

Overall, there is limited understanding of the sewage treatment process

While some participants have a good understanding of where their waste water goes and how it is treated, most have limited knowledge of this process, and many misconceptions. When it comes to wipes specifically, many believe these will be sieved out during processing and then sent to landfill or incineration.

“I imagine it will go through local pipes, travelling to where the main sewerage system is, then I think they hit the sea? Although maybe they evaporate before they reach the final destination.” Louise B

“I think that a flushed wet wipe... reaches the sewerage treatment plant where it will be removed with some sort of screen or sieve.” Julie C

“I think the wipe will end up in the same place toilet rolls ends up. I’m not sure what they do with the toilet roll but I’m sure it will end up in a big plant that sorts through it then possibly either incinerated or sent to a landfill.” Kimberley

“I think it [a flushed wet wipe] goes through the sewers and to the treatment plant where it is then filtered out of the water and waste and then sent to landfill or compost depending on type.” Louis

“I hope that wipes are separated and put in a secure area where they are allowed to disintegrate.” Louise L

AWARENESS, ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

Many types of wipes are believed to disintegrate when flushed

A small proportion of people believe that all types of wet wipes break down just like toilet paper (4% think this nationally, and 3% in the North West). However, among flushers, this increases to around 1 in 10 (13% nationally and 10% in the North West), suggesting that this perception is driving flushing behaviour for some.

Looking at the qualitative data, it is generally assumed that wipes labelled as flushable or biodegradable will disintegrate in the sewer, prior to reaching water treatment. Some participants, however, question whether this is the case, and how long these wipes take to break down, if at all.

Those wipes not labelled as flushable are typically seen as being less likely to disintegrate when flushed, and therefore more likely to cause issues, although not by all.

“I think the ones labelled flushable and biodegradable would break down quickly, like toilet paper, and go through the sewage system quicker and easier without causing blockages.” Gillian

*“Even flushable ones – even though they are biodegradable, they will be around until their biodegradable time is up, however long that may be?”
Victoria*

“I imagine non-flush wipes resist more of the process and it's more likely that traces of the wipe remain in the water, eventually ending up in our water supply and the water course in general. Flushable wipes are more easily broken down. Biodegradable wipes will eventually disintegrate, leaving much less trace in the water. I don't think the biodegradation process is very quick though.” Maria

*“A non-flushable wipe will form over time into a fatberg that gets bigger and bigger, eventually it will block the pipes causing problems in the sewers such as overspill. A flushable wipe will gradually dissolve and split up into smaller pieces and pass through the sewers causing no issues.”
Neesha*

AWARENESS, ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

Most do not think about what happens to wipes when flushed

What happens to wipes when they are flushed down the toilet, and the sewage treatment system in general, is not something that most people consider or think about often, or in much detail. This is typically seen as something they do not need to worry about, as it is someone else's responsibility.

Those who have thought about this in the past suggested they were prompted by things they have read, heard or seen, such as in the media, news and television. Some were also prompted due to personal experience of blockages, and one person mentioned seeing wet wipes on beaches was something that made them think more deeply about the issue. These are often passing thoughts, with little influence on actual flushing behaviour.

"It does become a passing thought but as you don't hear much about it it's often not something I would worry about or give too much time on."

Gavin

"I haven't really thought about this before today, it's something we all take for granted and tend not to think about because someone else is sorting it out for us."

"I will occasionally think about this when I am at the coast on a beach, if I ever saw a wet wipe floating in the sea, it would make me consider how it got there."

"I only really thought about it when I watched a programme on TV with my son, Go Jetters, and they had to save the planet by going into the sewers to break the fatbergs. Up until then I never thought about it or knew how bad flushing a wipe in the toilet was."

Neesha

"I have thought about this a few times, especially when I have seen on TV about sewer blockages and I have often wondered whether any of the wipes they have found are labelled as flushable."

Louis

AWARENESS, ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

Most believe that other people dispose of wipes in the same way as them

When asked about the flushing behaviour of others, the vast majority of participants feel that other people dispose of their wipes in the same way as they do (regardless of the disposal method), indicating that they believe they are part of a majority. It is assumed that other people also use their same rationale for deciding what to flush and what not to, such as flushing based on hygiene like Carol, or based on where they are in the house like Kimberley.

However, participants also emphasised that wet wipe use and disposal is rarely (if ever) discussed with friends and family, making this perception purely based on assumption.

***“I think other people flush them down the toilet too, because of hygiene.”
Carol***

“I just assume people do the same as me and either bin or flush them depending on where they are in the house.” Kimberley

***“I think my family and friends will do pretty much the same as us – all the best intentions to flush only products made to be disposed of down the toilet but, again, there may be the odd occasion where other ‘non disposable’ wipes have been purposely or accidentally flushed.”
Victoria***

“I think most people flush. I do not know for sure as it is not something that ever really comes up in conversation.” Richard

KEY INSIGHTS: CHANGING BEHAVIOUR

PACKAGING AND LABELS

Clearer 'do not flush' messages will encourage some to bin their wipes

When discussing what factors would be likely to change flushers' behaviour, and encourage them to bin their wipes, some felt that having much clearer and prominent 'do not flush' messages on the front of wet wipe packaging would discourage them from flushing wipes in the future. It was suggested this could include information of the impacts of wipes, and should be consistent across all different types of wipes to make it easier to recognise.

"I can see the 'do not flush down the toilet' graphic on the front. Now I've seen it, I'll make sure to put the wipes in the rubbish bin instead... I'm conscious that I have flushed them down the toilet in the past... A more obvious warning sign might make me stop and think." Adrian

"I would rather be informed of this on the packaging, i.e. 'this product is flushable but may have a negative impact on the environment'. I would likely feel misled otherwise." Victoria

"They all use the image of a crossed out man or woman throwing rubbish into the toilet when it's not flushable. This is usually lost on me if it's on the back, but do take more notice when it's on the front." Gavin

However, some will continue to ignore 'do not flush' messages

However, there are a proportion of flushers who explained that more obvious warnings on packaging would not have an impact on them, and they would continue flushing their wipes regardless. For this group, other factors will be necessary to change their behaviour.

"I always knew they weren't flushable but I ignore this!" Chris

"To be honest, I rarely look at the labels and even if I did I can't honestly say I wouldn't flush wipes that said do not flush." William

BATHROOM BINS

Encouraging (hygienic) use of bins in bathrooms will prevent some from flushing

A number of participants explained that buying a bin for using in their bathrooms would discourage them from flushing their wet wipes down the toilet. This was often discussed among those who prefer to flush for hygiene reasons; this group felt that if they used bin liners, then wipes can be hygienically disposed of in a bathroom bin. Some suggested that using and emptying a bathroom bin is not necessarily an inconvenience and something they could get used to doing in time.

“A bin in the bathroom is literally what I am thinking I need. I honestly never thought anything of flushing wipes down the toilet but now I really do feel like I need a bin.” Kimberley

*“...I am thinking the same, a bin lined with a bag which is easy to dispose.”
Norma*

“Putting a small bin in the bathroom would help me... I am sure I would get used to it and it wouldn't be too much of a problem.” Alison

“I would still buy them, I would just have to adapt the new habit of putting them in the bin next to the toilet. I would also start to line the bin with a bin liner so I wouldn't have to touch used wipes. I would feel inconvenienced, but I know that if it's not polluting the world then it's not much of a price to pay.” Rachael

BATHROOM BINS

Disposal bags are seen as a hygienic but wasteful way to bin

Many participants suggested that use of bags, such as nappy sacks, food bags, or similar, would help them to dispose of their wipes hygienically in their general waste bins at home, avoiding flushing them down the toilet. This is often seen to be a sufficiently hygienic way to dispose of wipes that are seen as messy, smelly or unclean to keep in bins at home.

However, bagging wipes creates some concern for increasing plastic waste, and is therefore not a solution that will work for all. Likewise, some flushers hold the perception that binning wipes adds waste to landfill, whereas flushing them does not. This is often used as an excuse for flushing behaviour, rather than being a driver, and something that future solutions should aim to address.

“I bought some food bags from Sainsbury's on my grocery shop last night and I intend to bag unflushable wipes up from now on and dispose of them properly in the bin.” Julie A

“If I couldn't flush the wipes I would still buy them. I would dispose of them in a nappy sack and put them straight in the general waste bin. I wouldn't find this difficult if I perhaps kept a pack of nappy sacks in the bathrooms.” Gillian

“I would need to have something like a sanitary bag to hand to dispose of them hygienically. I would then feel happier about putting them in the bin.” Jody

“If we put them in nappy sacks it would just increase the amount of plastic being disposed of.” William

“It [flushing] means I do not need another product like nappy bags to put them in to contain the smell. So it's helping me not use more products. I think this is making more waste by bagging it up.” Neesha

“It [flushing wipes] reduces landfill waste.” Ngufor

BLOCKAGES

Personal experience of blockages can directly encourage binning

A small number of participants have experienced blockages in the past, where it has often led to a direct change in flushing behaviour. Fatima, for instance, flushed all different types of wipes until experiencing repeated blockages, finally identified as being caused by wipes. She now only flushes wipes labelled as flushable. Similarly, Louise avoids flushing wipes that are not labelled as flushable due to fear of blockages.

However, flushers do not always associate blockages to their own behaviour. Helene, who regularly flushes baby wipes down the toilet, experienced a blockage in shared drains and attributed this to nappies, rather than her own behaviour, and therefore continued flushing. Later in the study Helene considered how her behaviour could impact her neighbours, and suggested

knowing this will encourage her to explore 'flushable' options.

For Ken, who only flushes toilet tissue wipes that are labelled as flushable, his experience of a blockage on his housing estate also helped him to understand how their drains (of 80 properties) are connected and how the behaviour of neighbours can impact him, and vice versa.

“I look out for [fine to flush] logos on packets. I never used to, [wipes were the] cause of my toilet getting blocked every few months and my husband getting mad... It was expensive to have it unblocked. Had to call a drain specialist a few times... The guy who unplugged it said it's wipes it's causing it. I just put in them now in a bag.” Fatima

“I find that my toilet does tend to get blocked quite easily and this just becomes a nightmare for me as I don't relish the thought of having to put my

hand down the loo to clear any blockages!” Louise L

“Our [shared] drains got blocked a few years ago with nappies and wet wipes, only no one on the line [of properties] had children so we weren't sure where those nappies came from... I might look for some more flushable wipes and try them out providing there not too expensive... I wouldn't want to cause a blockage in the neighbour's garden as the pipes on our block are for four houses so we would get charged” Helene

The only time I've thought about this before was when I had a problem with mine and my neighbour's drains, when we called out our water utilities company to clear a blockage. It turned out it wasn't our drains that were blocked, but somebody else's drain on our housing estate. I then realised how many houses were connected.” Ken

BLOCKAGES

Increased awareness and perceived risk of blockages will discourage some from flushing

Most participants suggested that experiencing a blockage caused by wipes would prevent them from flushing in future, due to the cost and inconvenience this would result in. Many also suggested that if they were made aware that their wipes had led to a blockage in a neighbour's drain, this would strongly encourage them to change their behaviour. Although some questioned how possible it would be to identify the source of the blockage in this instance.

“Causing blockages with wipes would most certainly discourage me from flushing them down the toilet. If a blockage was caused I would need a specialist to remove the blockage so would have to pay for the service and it would deter me and make me think about flushing anything down the toilet in the future.” Norma

“I would feel awful if I knew I had blocked someone's toilet or my own toilet... I would immediately stop flushing wipes and dispose of them in the bin.” Fatima

“The fact that they can cause a blockage and I or my neighbours could get charged to remove it, along with the fact that they could end up on the sea or river, has changed my outlook on flushing them away. I am now going to dispose of them in the general waste I'm going to keep nappy sacks in the bathrooms and use them. I think if others thought about it they would feel the same.” Gillian

“I think if you were able to see that you had caused something or you were billed with the charges it would hit home quite hard. I would probably be discouraged from flushing wipes and would seek out an alternative.” Louis

BLOCKAGES

However, increased awareness of blockages will not change behaviour for all

Some flushers feel that knowing a blockage could occur, as a result of disposing of wipes down the toilet, is not enough to deter them from doing so. For some, it is the direct experience of blockages that would have impact.

However, one participant suggested that if they were to experience blocked drains, they would consider a blockage as a 'one off', as this has not happened before, and they would therefore continue flushing wipes. These attitudes are often coupled with the perception that the removal of blockages from drains and the wider sewage system are paid for within water bills, and therefore not necessarily a cause for concern.

"I already knew this [that wipes cause blockages] was the case and honestly maybe it's a bit selfish way to think but it's never really bothered me, maybe as I already pay quite a lot of water bill rates and this covers sewage treatment so I feel it should be dealt with by the relevant company for the area." Gavin

"My toilet has never got blocked in 20 years flushing the wipes, think it depends on the plumbing." Norma

"If you have never suffered a blockage you don't think you will ever get one." William

"There's no reason really why I couldn't put them in a bin and empty it daily, but as it's causing no harm (well, yet) to my toilet, I'll carry on." Helene

"After 15 years of flushing wipes I never had a blockage so I would regard it as a "one off"." Chris

BLOCKAGES

Charging for blockages would deter some from flushing, but seen as difficult to prove

Overall, participants suggested that being charged for the removal of a blockage would be hugely effective in changing their behaviour. For some, such as William, there is little else that would encourage them to dispose of all wipes in the bin.

However, as mentioned previously, some feel it would be very difficult to trace the source of the blockage back to their property, and would therefore feel it is unlikely to happen. Others hold the perception that the removal of blockages is already paid for by water bills and therefore an additional charge for this would be unfair.

“I’d feel really bad if it blocked my pipes and I’d had to pay for the unblocking, caused by wipes, I’d stop using them!” Ken

“I hate paying for things unnecessarily so would feel really hard done to if I had to pay for something that could have been prevented by myself or my families actions.” Victoria

“I would be upset if I had to pay for a removal of a blockage as in my eyes I am not doing anything wrong. Plus how could they prove it was just me that caused said blockage? It could be my neighbours or even the previous owners. That’s a very tricky situation to be in and I wouldn’t be happy if I am honest. Doesn’t my water bill cover sewerage costs anyway?” Neesha

“I would expect to be charged if the blockage were in my system, but you just hope this won’t happen. So it is not really a deterrent. I suppose we all pay already for blockages in the main system, the costs will be added to our water rates. Maybe this should be made clear to us and also exactly how

much it costs to remove such blockages.” Alison

“If I caused a blockage and was charged for clearing it then my behaviour would change. We hear about fatbergs but that doesn’t equate to wet wipes with most people. I would be disappointed to cause a blockage in my neighbours’ drains though I cannot see how it would be attributed to me. I certainly would admit to it.” William

“I suspect the blockages would happen well away from my home, so if I was the cause of one, I’m highly unlikely to know about it.” Adrian

“Charging for removal of blockages is a whole can of worms. How can you attribute that particular blockage to any one family. I don’t think that is a viable proposition.” Dave

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Increasing awareness and perceived risk of damage to the environment and marine life will motivate some to change their behaviour

Many of those who flush wet wipes say they would immediately alter their behaviour if they were to learn that their wipes had ended up in seas or rivers, and contributed to harm to marine life or the environment. For many, knowing this is more effective for changing their behaviour than other factors, such as the risk of a blockage. However, some flushers, such as Julie, indicated that they would need to be sure that this was occurring as a result of their behaviour before deciding to bin wipes instead.

“I'd feel guilty and ashamed especially if the wipe ended up in the sea, I didn't know this was possible. If I knew for sure the wipe had ended up in the sea or caused a blockage I would stop flushing them immediately and bin them instead.” Julie A

“I would feel bad if it ended up polluting the planet. Not so much if it cause a pipe blockage that can be sorted. But if we don't start making changes the world is going to ruin! It would stop me flushing them for sure.” Rachael

“If it ended up in the sea or a river I would feel ashamed and seriously reconsider my habits in terms of using wipes, no matter if it's flushable or biodegradable. For me personally, it affecting seas or rivers would prompt me to change.” Angelica

“I think I'm clever by not flushing more than two [baby wipes] at once. I wouldn't want them to end up in the river or sea as don't want to hurt any animals. If they did, I would try and stop flushing down the toilet.” Helene

“I would be upset if I found out I had contributed to adding junk to our environment. When I flush wet wipes I

expect/hope this waste is going to a treatment plant and wipes removed. I would just stop using wipes, flushable or otherwise.” Lee

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Awareness of environmental impact can be coupled with negative perceptions of water companies

Greater awareness that wipes can end up in seas, rivers, or on beaches, potentially harm marine life and release chemicals and microplastics into natural environments, can often be coupled with negative perceptions of water companies. With many lacking knowledge of the waste water treatment system, and how wet wipes can enter the natural environments, many flushers assume that this is due to water companies incorrectly or illegally managing sewage.

As such, a proportion of flushers quickly shift responsibility to the water companies, believing it is their job to correct. Awareness that this can occur is therefore not enough to discourage this group from flushing their wipes. Any communications regarding the

environmental impact must therefore also address this perception.

“I think a big underlying issue is that water companies regularly pump millions of tons of untreated sewage into rivers and seas, and the presence of wipes in this makes it really noticeable; they're getting "caught out" with their dirty behaviour.” Chris

“I know some can end up in the sea and rivers but I feel this is on the part of the treatment plants as they should be correctly sorting the waste and not dumping it straight into the sea or rivers.” Louis

“If it ended up in the sea or a river then it's the sewage facility's fault not mine and I'd be questioning where my taxes are going.” Alex

“If they [wet wipes] ended up in the sea or a river the water company should be fined for not doing their job. I wouldn't necessarily stop flushing because of this.” William

“I'd be a bit baffled if it ended up in river because I would expect it to be vanished or dissolved before reaching (the) river, especially if it was flushable.” Shabhana

PERCEPTIONS OF 'FLUSHABILITY'

Increase awareness of the true 'flushability' of wipes

Due to the many misconceptions around the 'flushability' of wipes, particularly those labelled as biodegradable and other eco claims, some participants suggested that knowing that these wipes are not truly flushable, and do not dissolve like toilet paper, for instance, would be enough to prevent them from flushing their wipes in future.

“Knowing the wipes are not truly flushable or biodegradable would be enough to discourage me from flushing them.” John

PERCEPTIONS OF 'FLUSHABILITY'

Some would stop using toilet wipes altogether if they could no longer flush

When discussing what would encourage them to bin wet wipes rather than flush them, some participants suggested they would rather not use certain wet wipe products at all than dispose of them in their bins at home. This is typically in relation to toilet tissue wipes, due to the use of these wipes and hygiene issues of them being stored in bins.

There are some, however, who believe that these wet wipes are a necessity, and would therefore move to binning them if required.

“If they were marketed as toilet wipes that you must dispose of elsewhere and not the toilet then I wouldn't buy them, I would just use toilet roll. On the occasion you may need a 'fresh up' then I would use a baby wipe for example and put it in the bin.” Victoria

“I would still buy wipes for cleaning plumbing/appliances/countertops but I don't think I would buy bathroom personal hygiene wipes as I would not want to house them indoors.” Louis

“I would stop buying personal hygiene wipes if I couldn't flush them. Just feels so unhygienic to put in a bin and then it could cause smells... For cleaning wet wipes I would dislike the inconvenience however it wouldn't be a huge deal and would be something minor to rectify by putting a small bin in the bathroom.” Kimberley

“If hygiene wipes were not flushable I wouldn't buy them, I'd just use toilet roll, however this would be unfavourable as I like the extra feeling of cleanliness the wipes provide.” Louise B

“Wet wipes are a necessity to life... so buying them is always going to be a thing regardless of if they were

flushable or not. I have no issue throwing wet wipes in the bin if that's what I needed to do.” Gavin

RESPONSIBILITY OF MANUFACTURERS

Some have a tendency to shift responsibility to the manufacturers

Some participants indicated that there is very little that will encourage them to change their behaviour, suggesting it is the responsibility of manufacturers to produce a product that is suitable for disposing of down the toilet. These flushers feel that their individual behaviour will have minimal impact, and that the industry must change to truly make a difference.

“The answer is to make manufacturers responsible for the waste of its products not the customer... I don't think it is my responsibility for how wet wipes are made. If the product is not suitable don't manufacture it.”

Daniel

“Not sure much would discourage me or others to not flush wet wipes at all as I do feel this is a higher up solution that needs to be mandated on companies. One person making a change won't make a difference.”

Gavin

**KEY INSIGHTS:
CUSTOMER SEGMENT
WET WIPE DISPOSAL PROFILES**

BUSY PARENTS

We can further understand flushing behaviour by looking at participants' responses, separated by the United Utilities customer segment they belong to. By exploring response separately, some key themes and patterns emerge, as outlined in the following segment profiles.

Previous research has suggested that the first three segments presented here are most likely to flush wipes.

The key insights from Busy Parent flushers are:

- They are motivated to flush wipes due to convenience, wanting the wipe gone and dealt with quickly, and it being seen as more hygienic than binning.
- They generally do not look at labels.
- Most are aware of the negative consequences of flushing, to some extent. They have an 'inkling' but can often put it out their mind.

- They use lots of different types of wipes for different purposes, both those labelled as flushable and non-flushable.
- A key barrier to binning is wipes that have been used for personal hygiene and bathroom cleaning, such as those seen as 'soiled', smelly, messy, or 'contaminated'.
- There is a tendency to shift responsibility to manufacturers.
- Solutions need to focus on hygienic methods of disposal, such as use of bathroom bins.
- They say that increasing their awareness and perceived risk of blockages and environmental impacts will encourage them to bin wipes.

Time-poor parents of young children.

Bigger concerns than saving the environment or reducing water usage but are open to communication.



of United
Utilities
customers



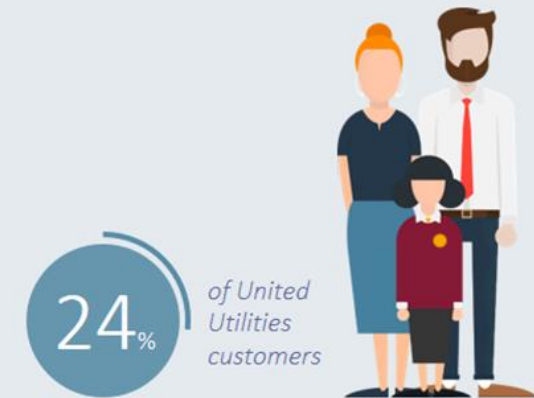
CAUTIOUS FAMILIES

The key insights from Cautious Family flushers are:

- They are motivated to flush wipes due to convenience, wanting the wipe gone and dealt with quickly, and it being seen as more hygienic than binning.
- They typically will only flush wipes they believe are flushable (e.g. it is labelled as flushable, biodegradable, or other eco labelling they take to mean flushable).
- Most are aware of the negative consequences of flushing, to some extent. They have an 'inkling', but can often put it out their mind.
- Solutions should focus on messages to communicate that biodegradable does not mean flushable, increasing residents' awareness of the consequences of flushing wipes (including the impacts of flushable wipes and the collective impact of blockages down the line), and encouraging hygienic methods of disposal.

Parents of older children.

Whilst the environment is not top of mind, as kids grow there is more time to think about their personal impact on the environment.



HERE AND NOW

The key insights from Here and Now flushers are:

- They are motivated to flush wipes due to convenience, ease of disposal, and it being seen as more hygienic than binning.
- They use many different types of wipes, for different purposes.
- Most are aware of the negative consequences of flushing, to some extent. They have an 'inkling', but can often put it out their mind.
- They are the most likely to flush wipes not labelled as flushable, although some only flush those they believe are flushable.
- Solutions to change behaviour should focus on encouraging (hygienic) use of bathroom bins, and increased awareness of consequences.

Digitally savvy young consumers.

They lack knowledge and awareness of environmental issues and the water cycle in particular.



ABLE ADVOCATES

The key insights from Able Advocate flushers are:

- They typically see themselves as doing the right thing; they are either unaware of consequences or believe the wipes they flush are fine to do so (e.g. it is labelled as flushable, biodegradable, or other eco labelling they take to mean flushable).
- They are generally aware of negative consequences of flushing wet wipes, but do not believe they are contributing to this.
- Solutions should focus on messaging to communicate that biodegradable does not mean flushable, increasing awareness of consequences (including the impacts of flushable wipes and the collective impact of blockages down the line), and encouraging hygienic methods of disposal, such as use of bathroom bins and bin liners.

Middle aged consumers with more spare time.

Conscious of the need to protect water resources and increasingly environmentally focused.



RESILIENT CHALLENGERS

The key insights from Resilient Challenger flushers are:

- They are more likely to only flush wipes labelled as flushable, such as toilet wipes. This labelling is strongly trusted.
- They are fairly well informed about sewage system and potential impacts of wipes.
- They use fewer types of wipes, and fewer wipes in general.
- A key barrier to binning wipes is perceived issues with hygiene, as wipes are often being used for toilet purposes.
- They say they would be motivated to bin their wipes by increased awareness of issues, particularly of the risks associated with wipes labelled as flushable (as well as those labelled as non-flushable).

Older empty nesters.

High expectations of UU, and environmentally conscious, they want to know what UU is doing to make a difference.



ACUTE NEEDS

While flushers within the Acute Needs segment also belong to a customer segment already mentioned, there are some key insights we can gather on these flushers specifically:

- This group can have specific health needs which influence their use of wet wipes, such as for personal care, and can therefore lead to them using more wipes in general.
- They are motivated to flush wipes due to convenience, ease of disposal, and it being seen as more hygienic than binning.
- They typically see themselves as doing the right thing; they are either unaware of consequences or believe the wipes they flush are fine to do so (e.g. it is labelled as flushable, biodegradable, or other eco labelling they take to mean flushable).
- Some suggest there is little that could be done to discourage them from flushing wipes. Solutions should focus on hygienic use of bathroom bins.

Consumers with multiple vulnerabilities, often financial or health related.

They do not see themselves as vulnerable, and often perceive someone else as “having it worse”, but are least resilient and need effective engagement.



CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSION

Overall, the factors motivating people to flush wipes down the toilet are hugely unique, personal, and complex. Wipe users are creating their own rules and rationale for what they will and will not flush, and these are often changeable, dependent on the situation and circumstances. There is also a great deal of misconception around wet wipes, which types are 'fine to flush' down the toilet, and what happens when they are. Even for those who have a greater understanding of this, the wider and collective impacts of wipes can be difficult to associate with their own, individual behaviour.

Coupled with this, wet wipes are seen as extremely convenient products for a host of personal hygiene and household cleaning uses, and are now viewed as essential products by many. It is perhaps due to this convenience, as well as the significant rise in eco-labelling in the sector, that these products are not currently seen as the preventable, single-use waste items that they are. With this

research predicting that 4.2 billion wipes are being flushed down the toilet each year, 39% of all 11 billion wipes purchased in the UK, this significant waste problem needs to be urgently addressed.

When it comes to changing behaviour, this complex picture means there is no single solution that will encourage the majority to bin their wipes rather than flush them. Instead, a range of solutions are necessary, delivering a variety of messages which address the many different drivers of flushing behaviour. A number of recommendations for addressing this are outlined in the pages below. To note, while the qualitative element of this research was carried out with North West residents, we suggest these insights and recommendations can also be applied to addressing this behaviour in the wider population.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Keep Britain Tidy recommends that the following approaches are considered for applying the insights from this research and addressing the number of wet wipes being flushed in the North West, and across the UK.

1. With a clear link between eco-labelling and flushing behaviour, there must be an immediate call to government and industry to address this. For instance, this could push for wet wipes to be included in a type of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) scheme, appeal for manufacturers to be restricted in their use of such labelling, and support this with a more prominent 'do not flush' message on the packaging of any wipes that have not met the 'fine to flush' standard. This message should be standardised to improve salience and recognition among consumers.
2. With changes to packaging likely to come into effect in the long term, consider shorter term approaches for tackling the effects of eco-labelling, a lack of disposal instruction, and a tendency for wet wipe flushers to shift responsibility to manufacturers. We suggest this should involve highlighting to wipe users that these changes are being called for; simply having this awareness of calls to manufacturers may in itself have an impact on behaviour. Messages to residents could be framed as helping to support this appeal.
3. With much perceived ambiguity around what can and cannot be flushed down the toilet, ensure 'do not flush' messages are clear-cut, eliminating room for interpretation. This should include communicating that any wipes, regardless of whether it says flushable, biodegradable, or anything else, cannot be flushed unless they have the 'fine to flush' logo.
4. To address the many misconceptions people hold about wipes, future interventions could consider a myth-busting-style communications campaign, using quotations from the research, combined with a clear-cut 'do not flush' message
5. Direct experience of blockages, where flushers' own behaviour can be established as the cause, is effective in preventing flushing behaviour. However, for the many flushers who have not experienced this, perceived risk of a blockage occurring is fairly low. Interventions should aim to close this gap, making the threat of blockages real, current, and imminent. This could employ techniques such as increasing awareness of local blockages and where the source has been attributed to, and helping residents to visualise exactly where in the local system their wipes may be accumulating without their knowledge.
6. Similarly, activity to raise awareness and perceived risk of environmental

RECOMMENDATIONS

issues should also explore ways to make these impacts feel more real, present and personal, reducing what is known as the 'psychological distance' of this threat. As many flushers care about impacts on environment, but do not currently link this to their own behaviour, there is much potential in changing behaviour. For instance, interventions could involve using hyper-local messaging to help residents understand how their wipes could enter and damage local watercourses.

7. However, any activity aimed at increasing awareness of environmental issues must also address the misunderstanding around how and why wet wipes are ending up in marine environments and the negative perceptions of water companies this can bring. Simple messages could aim to increase awareness of storm overflows, how fewer blockages would reduce the need for these, and address

perceptions of 'illegal dumping' of sewage into the sea.

8. While the flushers of wet wipes are as equally likely to have a bin as non-flushers, it is clear that the presence of a bathroom bin will still encourage a proportion of flushers to bin their wipes, either some or all of the time. This is likely to be particularly so for those flushers motivated by convenience and ease of disposal, and who flush based on where they are in the house. Work towards an ambition for all residents to have a bin in their bathrooms at home, aiming communications at the one in five people who do not currently have one. These communications should also emphasise the ways in which bins can be used hygienically, such as using bin liners.
9. Future interventions and communications around binning wipes should be aware of or acknowledge the fact that some people would prefer to stop using

some or all of their wet wipe products altogether, than having these stored in their bins at home. Although positive from a waste perspective, this may prove more challenging in terms of changing behaviour. This group may require different approaches, such as highlighting the alternatives to wet wipe products and the benefits of these.

10. An additional charge for the removal of blockages, or potentially even the threat of this, is likely to be effective in preventing future flushing of wipes. However, if this approach is considered, it should address perceptions that this already paid for within water rates, and assumptions that it will not be possible to trace the source of a blockage to an individual property. For instance, this could use case studies to show how this has been done before, or consider splitting the charge charging multiple properties if a source cannot be identified.

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