

Septic Epidemic

Guidance on Avoiding and Addressing Septic Issues while Reducing Risk of Disease

As the public continues to prepare and practice social distancing and self-isolation due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, household products such as hand sanitizers, hand soaps, paper towels, disinfecting wipes, and toilet paper continue to be stockpiled and, in some cases, misused and improperly discarded.

On March 17, 2020, the California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA) State Water Resource Control Board released a news advisory which stated:

“Flushing wipes, paper towels and similar products down toilets will clog sewers and cause backups and overflows at wastewater treatment facilities, creating an additional public health risk in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. Even wipes labeled “flushable” will clog pipes and interfere with sewage collection and treatment throughout the state.” CalEPA: [The Public is Advised to NOT Flush Disinfecting Wipes, Paper Towels down Toilet – Throw Them Away Instead](#)



On March 30, 2020, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) released a nationwide message for all Americans to only flush toilet paper. They stated:

“Flushing only toilet paper helps ensure that the toilets, plumbing, sewer systems and septic systems will continue working properly to safely manage our nation’s wastewater” and “Preventable toilet and sewer backups can pose a threat to human health and present an extra challenge to our water utilities and their workforce.” USEPA: [EPA Encourages Americans to Only Flush Toilet Paper](#)

As consumers, it is important to follow the aforementioned recommendations and only flush toilet paper. All other materials including wipes (no matter how labelled), paper towels, tissues, and similar products should be put into the trash to avoid sewage back-ups and overflow.

If a large-scale septic issue does occur, either due to improper disposal or other cause, it is extremely important to take precautions during cleaning and remediation. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has indicated that the virus that causes COVID-19 (i.e., SARS-CoV-2) has been detected in feces of some patients diagnosed with COVID-19, however,



the amount of the virus, how long the virus sheds, and whether the virus in the stool is infectious is unknown (CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/water.html>).

Workers who handle or use materials which have been in contact with human waste or sewage, such as plumbers, remediation and water cleanup technicians, or building inspectors, may be at an increased risk of an exposure that could lead to an illness. In addition to taking increased precautions when entering a home during the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) such as wearing personal protective equipment (PPE), safe distance practices, regularly washing hands with soap and water for 20 seconds or more, and using hand sanitizer, the CDC adds training workers handling human waste sewage on basic hygiene practices:

Basic Hygiene Practices

- Wash hands with soap and water *after* handling waste materials and *before* eating/drinking or using the toilet.
- Cover open sores, cuts, and wounds with a dry bandage before handling waste.
- Avoid touching face, mouth, eyes, nose, or open sores and cuts while handling waste.
- Before eating, remove soiled work clothes and eat in a designated area away from the waste.
- Do not smoke, chew tobacco, or chew gum while handling waste.
- Gently flush eyes if human waste contacts eyes.
- Remove rubber boots and work clothes before leaving worksite.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

- Goggles
- Protective face mask or splash-proof face shield
- Liquid-repellent coveralls
- Waterproof gloves
- Rubber boots

Training

- All workers who handle human waste or sewage should receive training on disease prevention.

Global Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene. Guidance for Workers handling Human Waste or Sewage
https://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/global/sanitation/workers_handlingwaste.html

It is also important to note that anyone who is handling human waste, including homeowners, due to a septic issue at any scale should follow the basic hygiene practices shown above and wear available PPE.



As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, we must remember to remain informed and follow safe and effective hygiene and work practices. As stated in a previous COVID-19 RHP article titled “Managing the Risks related to COVID-19” by Mr. Fred Boelter:

“Strategies for stopping this mind boggling devastation from occurring involve taking fundamental precautions such as good personal hygiene and occupational hygiene principles, namely “reduce” or “eliminate” potential exposure.”

Fred Boelter, CIH, PE, BCEE, FAIHA, “Managing the Risks related to COVID-19”. https://rhprisk.com/wp-content/uploads/Managing-the-Risks-related-to-COVID-19_RHP-Risk-Management_F.-Boelter.pdf

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