



What Not to Put Down Your Drain and Garbage Disposal

You cooked dinner and tossed the scraps down the kitchen sink to let the garbage disposal work its magic. You painted a bookcase and rinsed the paintbrush in your bathroom sink. Or maybe you emptied your kitty litter into the toilet and flushed it.

We've all done things like this many, many times — typically without giving it a second thought. But, did you know that those little lapses in judgment could eventually cost you money?

That's right. Abusing your home's plumbing system by allowing it to come into contact with certain items and materials may eventually lead to a failure in your home's plumbing system. And, that failure can cost you a lot of money.

While you can't typically see most of your home's plumbing system, you can easily protect it against clogs and corrosion by being vigilant about what goes down the drain and acting quickly when you start to notice a problem. You may have to change a few habits or get your hands a little dirty, but putting more time and attention into your home's drains now may save you a lot of money down the road.

How to Tell If Your Drain Is Clogged

When it comes to identifying a problem with your plumbing, the good news is that it's generally easy to spot. First, you'll notice that water is draining slower than usual, whether it's your tub or a kitchen or bathroom sink. If you just leave it alone, eventually it will stop draining altogether, and that will indicate that the clog has blocked a portion of the pipe.

The bad news is that by the time one of your pipes get to this point, the problem has likely been building up for months, or maybe even years. Whether you realize it or not, you've likely been subjecting your plumbing to all sorts of foreign objects and things that don't belong down there. And, eventually, those things are going to build up until a clog forms.

Right now, you might be thinking, "But it's a drain. Isn't it there for me to wash things into it?"

No, it's not.

Your drain and the plumbing system running through your house are designed to process liquids. But, if you're like most people, you've gotten into the habit of using drains to dispose of any number of household items. It can catch up with you. The obvious solution is to change your habits and be vigilant about what does and doesn't go down your drain. If you're going to do that, it's important to understand more about your pipes. So, let's start with the basics.

What Not to Put Down Your Drain

Below are some of the items people commonly put down their drains that should not go in their household plumbing.

1. Flushable Kitty Litter

Yes, we realize the word "flushable" is in the title, but, sadly, that's not an accurate description of this product. Even "flushable" cat litter has been known to clog drains and create huge problems. Besides that, cat litter can pick up bacteria from your cat's feces. This bacteria is resistant to the chemicals typically used to treat water, which means it can eventually find its way into the water supply where it can be a threat to humans and many animals, especially sea otters.

2. Coffee Grounds



Most people assume that coffee grounds are small enough that they won't stick around in your pipes, but that's not the case. In fact, most plumbers say that coffee grounds are one of the most likely sources of a clog in your kitchen pipes.

3. Eggshells

Eggshells themselves may seem harmless, but when you send them down the drain, the garbage disposal grinds them up into small bits and then they get stuck in grease and fat and other oily substances to create a thick mess that can easily clog your pipes. You're better off disposing of your eggshells by putting them in the trash can.

4. Grease, Fat and Oils

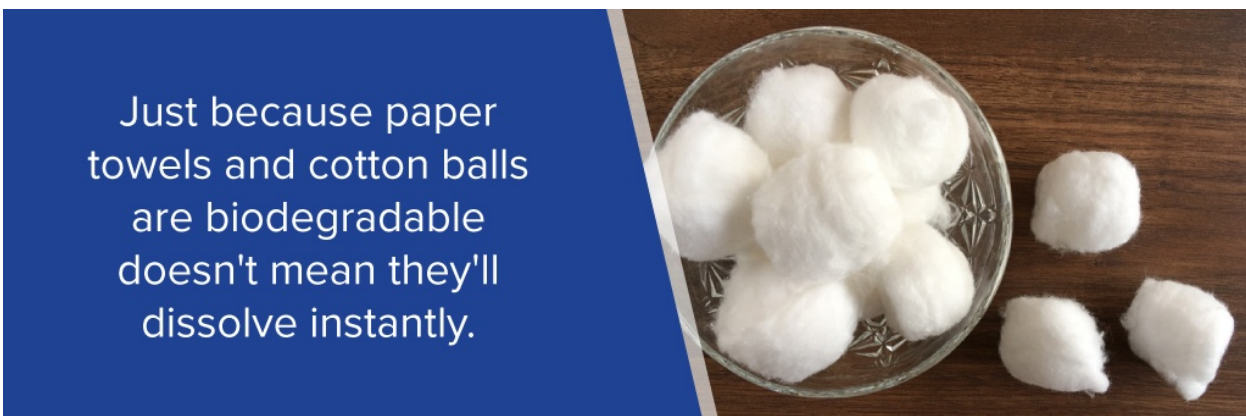


These three substances are combined because they seem to be the trifecta of kitchen plumbing woes. They act as a binder for all sorts of materials, such as the eggshells mentioned previously, and create thick, sticky globs that can coat pipes until nothing can pass through them. In fact, these substances account for more than 47 percent of all sewer overflows that happen in the United States each year. So, when it comes to bacon grease, meat fat and other substances like these, the best rule of thumb is to place them into a jar or can to allow them to cool and then place them in your trash.

5. Produce Stickers

These seemingly harmless little stickers can actually cause big problems inside your pipes. They may not seem like it, but even the little bit of adhesive that's on them can be enough to cause them to stick to the insides of the pipes. If they make it past your pipes, they can also get caught in wastewater treatment pipes and filters, causing problems with the equipment designed to treat your water. If somehow they make it past both of these barriers, they can end up in the water supply. Any way you look at it, that just spells trouble.

6. Cotton Balls and Paper Towels



Just because paper towels and cotton balls are biodegradable doesn't mean they'll dissolve instantly. They're designed to be absorbent, which actually makes them the perfect culprit to clog pipes. If you have

to use them, throw them in the trash when you're done. However, we recommend switching to cloth towels, especially in the kitchen where people tend to go through a lot of paper towels in a short time.

7. Condoms

Don't flush your condoms. Condoms are made of rubber. Rubber isn't biodegradable. It doesn't dissolve in water. It will either get stuck in your plumbing or, if it somehow manages to get past your pipes, it will most likely end up floating around in the water supply somewhere and no one wants to encounter that.

8. Household Fluids

Household fluids include things such as household cleaners and car fluids. While these don't necessarily cause clogs in your pipes, these chemicals can be harmful when they are mixed into the water supply. If you're washing them down the drain, they will make it into the water. Car fluids also should never be disposed of through your household water system. Check with your city or county, or a local auto parts store, for disposal guidelines. And, last, but not least, avoid allowing toxic household cleaners into the water system by switching to all-natural cleaners. If you're feeling especially industrious, you can make your own.

9. Medication

Sending medications through your pipes might not seem like a big deal and it likely won't clog them, but no one wants your medications in their water supply. Years ago, we used to be told to flush unused medications down the toilet rather than throwing them in the trash. Sadly, this practice has resulted in all kinds of medications, everything from ibuprofen to birth control, ending up in our water supply. In 2002, the U.S. Geological Survey studied 139 streams over 30 different states. Their goal was to identify certain chemicals within the water supply. Not only did they find the chemicals they were looking for in 80 percent of the streams they tested, but they determined that personal care and pharmaceutical products were a big reason for why those chemicals were present. Please visit www.epa.gov for further information.

10. Feminine Hygiene Products

Just like condoms, this should go without saying, but sadly there is still debate over whether or not this is appropriate. Some people and companies claim that flushing tampons is actually more sanitary, but plumbers — and anyone else who has had to deal with a toilet clogged by a tampon — tend to disagree. Feminine products don't dissolve in the water, which means that they always have the potential to get stuck. And, if they make it through your household pipes without incident, they can cause problems when they make it into wastewater treatment facilities. As a general rule, all feminine hygiene products should be carefully wrapped and placed in a trash can. It's just not worth the risk — or the whopping plumbing bill — that may result.

11. Paint



The big issue with paint is the number of toxins and chemicals that can end up in the water supply.

It may be last on our list, but this is one of the most serious issues we could address. Washing paint down the drain is a major problem. The issue isn't so much with the condition of your pipes themselves. The big issue is the number of toxins and chemicals from the paint that can end up in the water supply. Care must be taken to dispose of hazardous products in the proper way to reduce the environmental impact and safety hazards caused by disposal. Toxic products carelessly tossed in the trash, can injure sanitation workers, damage collection vehicles, or leak into the environment. Similarly, when dumped down the drain some products can cause water pollution, and damage plumbing systems. Products poured on the ground or in a storm sewer pollute our water supply. Visit the county's Chemical Reuse Shop at Mid County Mini-Transfer & Recycling Facility and take home anything from motor oil to furniture polish to house paint for FREE.

What to Do If Your Drain Gets Clogged or Garbage Disposal Is Not Draining

Even with the best of intentions, at some point you'll experience a clogged drain. And, if you're like most people, it may cause a moment of panic. As a first step, we always recommend attempting to clear the clog with a plunger. Yes, you can use a plunger on sinks and tubs — they aren't just for toilets. But, it's important to realize that you'll use a different kind of plunger and a different method depending on whether you're working on a toilet or a sink or tub. If you're plunging a toilet, you'll want a plunger with a flange on it to give you the right amount of suction.

How to Unclog a Sink or Tub Drain

1. Cover the overflow valve or, if you're working on one side of a double sink, cover the drain on the side that isn't clogged. This keeps the air inside the pipe to maximize the suction power of the plunger. You can also increase suction by putting some petroleum jelly around the cup of the plunger.
2. Place the bell of the plunger over top of the drain, making sure it is submerged in the standing water that is likely pooled in the tub or sink.
3. Push down on the handle gently.

4. Repeat, gradually increasing the force you use to push. Make sure that you keep your motions strong, but don't do it so hard that you break the suction you created before you started.
5. Continue the repetitive pushing motion for 20 seconds.
6. After 20 seconds, stop and remove the plunger. The clog should be cleared at this point.

How to Unclog a Toilet

Note: If a toilet is about to overflow due to a clog, don't rush in and plunge it or you'll find yourself with a huge mess on your hands. Wait 10 minutes or so to give the water level time to decrease before you start plunging.

1. Find the water supply hose, located on the wall behind the toilet. Grab the handle and turn it clockwise to close the valve and cut off the water supply to the toilet.
2. At this point, if there is still too much water in the toilet bowl, use a bucket or cup to remove the extra water. On the flip side, if there's not much water in the bowl, add some. Either way, you want the toilet bowl to be half full before you start using the plunger. This is going to make sure you have the proper amount of suction to remove the clog.
3. Submerge the plunger until the top of the bell is covered with water. Insert the flange directly into the toilet drain.
4. Push, then pull on the handle in a strong, repetitive motion for 20 seconds. Do not pull so hard that you break the seal and lift the plunger out of the drain. When you do break the seal after the 20 seconds are up, the clog should be gone.
5. If unable to resolve the clog on your own, please contact a licensed professional.

Note: Adapted from davidleroyplumbing.com, www.epa.gov and charlottecountyfl.gov websites.