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Flushing out the truth about recycled toilet paper

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Which would you rather flush: a tree or an old office memo?

That's the difference between typical toilet paper, made from virgin timber, and recycled toilet paper, usually made from discarded office paper.

Recycled paper is on a roll, with an increasing number of new products appearing on store shelves. Consumers can now easily find various brands of recycled-content toilet paper, facial tissues, paper towels and napkins, as well as printing paper.

Q: What does it really matter where my toilet paper and other household paper products come from?

A: Many of us here in the Seattle area consider ourselves great recyclers, but we're usually just thinking about the collection part. For recycling to succeed, a company needs to turn that collected stuff into a product, and someone needs to buy that product.

Making recycled paper consumes less water and energy and creates less air pollution and water pollution than making paper from timber. Many trees used for tissue products do grow on tree farms, and lumber by-products such as wood chips may be reclaimed for tissue. But some trees from old-growth forests still end up in a product we use for five seconds and then flush down the toilet.

Q: Isn't the main problem with recycled toilet paper that it isn't soft enough?

A: Tissue products made from 100 percent recycled paper are not as soft as standard tissue products, since fibers in recycled paper are shorter than fibers directly from trees. But a product could have 40 percent recycled content, for example, and you might not even notice the difference.

Ultrasoft toilet paper has been marketed heavily, and the most popular U.S. consumer brands contain zero recycled paper. But not everyone desires extremely soft toilet paper, and some people have concerns that the thick, super-soft brands may clog pipes.

Q: Where can I test-drive recycled toilet paper?

A: You probably already use it. Recycled TP and paper towels are found at many businesses, schools and even fancy hotels. Keep in mind that recycled-content tissue products for consumers may be softer than the brand you use at work.

Q: What's new in recycled-tissue products for the home?

A: Industry giant Kimberly-Clark and the Safeway grocery chain both just introduced new recycled-content facial tissues, toilet paper, napkins and paper towels. Longtime recycled-paper-maker Marcal has a new low-cost, 100-percent-recycled tissue line called Small Steps. Many local stores now carry at least one brand of recycled-tissue products, and even feature them in promotions.

Consumers can also benefit from new and updated resources online such as the Natural Resources Defense Council's "Shopper's Guide to Home Tissue Products" (www.nrdc.org/land/forests/gtissue.asp).

Q: Let's get out of the bathroom and talk about printing paper. What's the story there?

A: More good news. You can now find recycled paper for home printers at office-supply chains, Costco and other stores. One highly regarded brand is produced right here in Washington state: Harbor 100, made by Grays Harbor Paper in Hoquiam from 100 percent "post-consumer" waste paper. Preferable in any paper product, post-consumer recycled content means the paper was generated by consumers or businesses, as opposed to "pre-consumer," which might consist of paper-mill scraps.

Conservatree (www.conservatree.org), a California-based nonprofit, provides extensive information online about recycled printing paper, as well as tissue products.

Q: Will I pay more for recycled paper?

A: Recycled printing paper will usually cost a bit more, but many recycled-tissue products for consumers are priced the same as or less than non-recycled tissue.

Q: Is recycled content the only green attribute to look for when buying paper products for home?

A: No. Also consider using products not bleached with chlorine, a potent pollutant. And as always, you'll lighten your footprint and save money if you consume less. Use cloth napkins, for example, or print on both sides of a sheet of paper, or use leaves instead of toilet paper. Just kidding about that last one!

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