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Sewage problems run deep so confront the menace

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Flush it and forget it.

That may sound like the perfect relationship with your toilet. But if you've ever had a sewer problem, you know ignorance can lead to a big mess. Just keeping in mind a few essential things about toilets and sewer pipes can save you a lot of grief later. So today we'll learn, or get off the pot.

Q: First things first. What's OK to flush down my toilet?

A: It couldn't be simpler. Based on recent research, the current recommendation is to flush only bodily waste and toilet paper down the toilet, according to King County Wastewater Treatment Division. Wipes and other items marketed as "flushable" can clog your pipes and cause problems at treatment plants (see www.kingcounty.gov/environment/wtd for more information).

Q: Sometimes my kids use too much toilet paper, and once they even flushed a washrag. What's the best way to unclog a toilet?

A: A toilet plunger works well, so keep one handy. A standard sink plunger has a simple rubber cup in a half-ball shape, while a true toilet plunger has an extended section on the half-ball, with a smaller opening. With water in the toilet, push with short strokes and get a tight seal with the plunger, then pull up hard.

Some folks have also had success unclogging toilets using green recipes easily found on the Internet, involving hot water, baking soda and vinegar for example. Never use chemical drain-opener products, since they can damage your toilet.

Q: What if the clog is way down in my sewer pipe?

A: Blockages in the side sewer between your house and the main line in the street are often caused by invading tree roots. This happens frequently in older Seattle-area neighborhoods, especially in the spring, and you will probably need to call in a plumber with a mechanical "snake."

Q: What else can I do?

A: Never put oil, grease or fat down your kitchen drain, since they stick to tree roots in your line and make clogs worse.

Consider removing problem trees, and when planting trees near sewer lines always check at a nursery or online to make sure they don't have invasive roots.

Chemical products you flush down the toilet to inhibit root growth in your sewer line may help temporarily, but are often toxic. Once roots have found your sewer line, they keep coming back, so you will likely need to have a plumber return with the snake once or twice a year.

Q: What's the long-term solution to root problems?

A: In most cases you'll eventually have to replace your sewer line, which may even go through neighbors' yards. If you live in Seattle and want to learn exactly where your side sewer line goes, visit the Web site <http://web1.seattle.gov/dpd/sidesewercardsv2>.

The map you'll see when you enter your address is on your "side sewer card," which your plumber uses as a reference.

Get several estimates from plumbers specializing in side-sewer work. Consider "pipe bursting," a modern sewer-line replacement method where they displace the pieces of the old clay pipe into the soil as they pull in a new plastic pipe to replace it. Pipe bursting is less disruptive, greener and usually cheaper than the standard open-trench method.

Any sewer line replacement can be expensive, however, often running from \$5,000 to \$15,000. Under a city of Seattle pilot program, low- or moderate-income Seattle homeowners may qualify for a zero-interest loan to fix sewer problems. Find out more at www.seattle.gov/housing/buying/repair_loans.htm.

Not everyone has a sewer line, of course, and septic systems have their own issues. For questions about septic systems, call Seattle & King County Public Health at 206-296-4932, or your local government.

It's definitely worth the effort to consider what happens after you flush. Otherwise, you may someday find yourself up that proverbial creek without a paddle.

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