

Proper procedure for sanitary napkin disposal

From Volume 45, Issue 4 - April 2008

Contractor Success

An area that is not often discussed can be a source of danger.

by: Dawn Shoemaker

Water and public works department websites of cities across the U.S. often include advisories that suggest ways customers can avoid water backup problems and prevent blockages and other sewer-related issues.

Although each department may have specific recommendations, it appears that one piece of advice is suggested over and over again to protect sewers and avoid plumbing problems: Do not flush sanitary napkins down toilets.

Danger of improper disposal

Repeatedly, these websites indicate that sanitary napkins and disposable diapers are the two major causes for water line backups.

One website advises: "Never put sanitary napkins down the toilet even if the labels indicate that you can do so. These were not meant to be disposed of in this manner and besides backing up lines, you could damage your plumbing system."

Not to mention, if the sewer is blocked, the costs to repair it can be steep and can fall on property owners if they are at fault.

Some towns even recommend that property owners "carry specific insurance that covers the costs and damages related to sewage backups as a result of improper sanitary napkin disposal."

Additionally, when feminine hygiene products and sanitary napkins are flushed down the toilet, they can pollute streams and rivers, cause hormonal changes in wildlife and enable harmful organisms to enter the food chain.

And, even though some manufacturers claim their napkins are soluble (will disintegrate), most are partially biodegradable at best.

Dealing with the safe and sanitary disposal of feminine hygiene products offers building service contractors (BSCs) profitable opportunities.

Hygiene issues

By the 1980s, disposable sanitary napkins were developed that were not as thick, were more comfortable for users and were more absorbent and effective compared to previous products.

"However, to call them sanitary is a bit of a misnomer," says Doug Calvert, president of Cannon Hygiene Inc., a global restroom hygiene service company. "Although they are sanitary when first used, because the napkin is usually in use for a period of time, they become a breeding ground

for harmful bacteria or germs when it comes time to dispose of them.”

Over the years, various treatments have been applied to combat the growth of harmful bacteria, reduce odors while in use, and keep sanitary napkins more hygienic.

However, in some cases, this has compromised comfort and caused irritation.

And still today, there is no known manufactured chemical or natural-ingredient treatment that has proven to effectively reduce or inhibit the growth of bacteria in the napkins for a prolonged period of time.

“This is why women must be sure to wash their hands thoroughly after removing sanitary napkins,” says Calvert. “And, it’s why cleaning professionals must be especially careful in how they handle and dispose of them, which is often not the case.”

Disposal issues

According to Calvert, although more and more cleaning professionals wear gloves while performing their duties, it is still not uncommon to see cleaning workers not wearing protective clothing.

“Most public restrooms still have the ‘swing top’ dispensers for feminine hygiene products that have been used for decades,” he says. “Often these do not have liners so the cleaning professional must pick them up to empty their contents, often reaching into the container to remove some of the napkins.”

The problem with this procedure, especially if gloves are not worn, is not only that the napkins are covered with bacteria, but the lip of the dispenser becomes soiled and often contaminated with potential blood-borne pathogens.

This can prove harmful to the custodial worker, and to subsequent users of the dispensers, as well.

“Additionally, they can accumulate in regular waste receptacles for several days,” Calvert says. “Often it is only after an odor problem starts to develop that they are finally emptied.”

More hygienic alternatives

In recent years, new products and technologies have been introduced that make the disposal of feminine hygiene products and sanitary napkins safer for local water departments.

Similar to other, more advanced restroom technologies, many of these products incorporate no-touch technology.

Neither the user nor the custodial worker actually touches the lid to use the device or to service it.

For instance, one system has a foot-pedal that opens and closes the dispenser.

Another system uses infrared sensor technology to open when needed.

“By eliminating touching, both systems reduce the possibility of cross-contamination and are much more sanitary for the user,” says Calvert. “The units are also designed so the user never sees the other napkins that have been disposed of while an extremely effective deodorizer is released each time the unit is used as well.”

Realizing the business opportunity this can offer, some BSCs now provide restroom hygiene services to specifically maintain these dispensers.

One company and their franchises actually removes the existing unit and replaces it with a fresh one each visit.

“This is really the most hygienic way to service these units,” adds Calvert. “This way all the cleaning of the unit and napkin disposal is done off-site, in a much more discrete, thorough and professional manner.”

Though studies have found that most restroom users are concerned about restroom germs, bacteria and hygiene, it does not mean they always do their part to prevent cross-contamination and the spread of disease.

In one study, 67 percent of the patrons in a public restroom were observed not washing their hands before leaving the restroom, even though hand-washing has long been promoted as the best way to stop the spread of germs and bacteria.

“Ultimately, these new, no-touch technologies and restroom services can only do so much. It is up to restroom patrons to do their part to protect public health as well.”

Dawn Shoemaker is a writer for the professional cleaning and building industries. She may be reached at info@alturasolutions.com.