



Pet Waste & Water Quality

Maine's lakes, streams, beaches and clam flats need your help. Some pet owners aren't aware that dumping pet waste in the street or storm sewer, or leaving it to decay on the sidewalk or the grass near the street, can degrade water quality and pose health risks.

Pet waste can degrade water quality and create public health risks at Maine's lakes, streams, beaches and clam flats.

At least half of all surface-water pollution in the country comes from contaminated runoff. Pet waste contributes to the pollution that is transported by runoff every time it rains.

Pollutants from pet waste that is not properly disposed of may be channeled by rain or melting snow

- directly into lakes and streams, or
- into storm sewers (that usually drain into lakes and streams).

Eventually, pollutants carried in this water find their way into the ocean.

When pet waste is washed into lakes, streams or coastal waters it can harm our environment in two ways. First, the waste carries nutrients that stimulate growth of nuisance weeds and algae. Overly fertile water becomes cloudy and green – unattractive for swimming, boating and fishing. Second, as the waste and the algae decay, oxygen is depleted, which can lead to fish kills. Also, ammonia can be released, further endangering Maine's fish population.

Perhaps most importantly, pet waste can carry diseases that make water unsafe for swimming or drinking.

What are the health risks associated with pet waste?

When pet waste is disposed of improperly, not only water quality suffers – your health may be at risk, too. Children who play outside and adults who garden are most at risk for infection from some of the bacteria and parasites found in pet waste. Flies may also spread diseases from animal waste. Diseases or parasites that can be transmitted from pet waste to humans include the following:

Campylobacteriosis: A bacterial infection carried by dogs and cats that frequently causes diarrhea in humans.

Cryptosporidium: A protozoan parasite carried by dogs, cats, mice, calves and many other mammals. Common symptoms include diarrhea, stomach cramps, nausea and dehydration. Can be fatal to people with depressed immune systems.

Toxocariasis: Roundworms usually transmitted from dogs to humans, often without noticeable symptoms, but may cause vision loss, a rash, fever or cough.

Toxoplasmosis: A protozoan parasite carried by cats that can cause birth defects such as mental retardation and blindness if a woman becomes infected during pregnancy; also a problem for people with depressed immune systems. Symptoms include headache, muscle aches and lymph node enlargement.



After a storm, water collected from sites like this one in Maine often has high levels of bacteria, potentially closing clam flats and posing health risks at swim beaches. Common sources of bacteria include sanitary sewer overflows, malfunctioning septic systems, livestock, pets and wildlife.

You can make a difference

Fortunately, there are some simple things we can all do to help keep our water clean.

The job of cleaning up after your pet can be as simple as taking a plastic bag or “pooper scooper” along on your next walk. Many communities have “pooper scooper” laws that govern pet waste cleanup. Some of these laws specifically require anyone who takes an animal off their property to carry a bag, shovel or pooper scooper. Any waste left by the animal must be cleaned up immediately. Call your town hall to find out more about local pet waste laws.

What should you do with the waste you pick up? Here are three options:

1) Flush it down the toilet.

The water from your toilet goes to a septic system or sewage treatment plant that removes most pollutants before the water reaches a lake, stream or the ocean.

To prevent plumbing problems, don't try to flush debris such as rocks, sticks or cat litter. Cat feces may be scooped out and flushed down the toilet, but used litter should be put in a securely closed bag in the trash.

2) Bury it in the yard.

Dig a hole or trench that is

- about 5 inches deep,

- away from vegetable gardens, and
- away from any lake, stream, ditch, well or the ocean.

Microorganisms in the top layer of soil will break down the waste and release nutrients to fertilize nearby plants.

To protect yourself and your family from disease, keep pet waste away from vegetable gardens and water supplies. Don't add pet waste to your compost pile. The pile won't get hot enough to kill disease organisms in pet waste.

If you leave pet waste to decay in your yard, be sure it does not become a problem. To prevent water pollution, clean up areas near wells, storm drains, ditches and waterways. Always remove waste from areas where children play. Children are the most frequent victims of diseases from pet waste. Don't forget, as always, that the best protection for children and adults is regular hand washing with soap and water.

3) Put it in the trash.

Check local ordinances first. Putting pet waste in the trash may be against the law in some communities. Even if legal and easy, it is not the best solution. Waste taken to the landfill or incinerator can still cause pollution problems.

Another option is to install an underground pet waste digester that works like a small septic tank. Before buying one, check local laws that may restrict their use, design or location.

Share your knowledge

If every pet owner in Maine properly disposed of pet waste, we could see measurable social, environmental and economic impacts, including decreases in water-borne disease, improved water quality and more clam harvesting acreage.

This fact sheet was originally developed by Carolyn Johnson for University of Wisconsin-Extension and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources as University of Wisconsin-Extension publication GWQ006. The material was adapted for Maine by Marine Extension Associate Kristen Whiting-Grant and Assistant Scientist Laura Wilson, with permission.

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