

## *Animal Waste and Water Quality*



It's first thing in the morning and the dog wants to go out right NOW, the cats are standing by their litter box waiting for some fresh kitty litter, and your toddler is demanding a trip to the park to feed the ducks. While none of these activities may sound like a major threat to the environment, animal waste is one of the many little sources of pollution that can add up to big problems for water quality and may cause human health problems as well. While most people connect animal waste problems to agriculture, studies have shown that pets, waterfowl and other urban wildlife waste can cause significant water pollution problems.

Animal waste contains several types of pollutants that contribute to water quality problems: nutrients, pathogens and a naturally toxic material, ammonia. When animal waste ends up in a lake or stream, it decomposes, using up oxygen and releasing its pollutant load. During summer months when the water is warm, the combination of low oxygen levels and ammonia can kill fish and other aquatic organisms. The nutrients cause excessive growth of aquatic weeds and algae. When these conditions make the water murky green and smelly, or when the surface of the water is completely covered with a thick mat of vegetation, the area becomes unattractive or unusable for swimming, boating or fishing.

Pathogens, the disease-causing bacteria and viruses associated with animal waste, can also make water unsafe for human use. If pathogens or the indicator bacteria associated with animal waste are found during water testing, shellfish beds may be closed to harvest, beaches may be closed to swimming and drinking water supplies may require expensive filtration or disinfection.

Fortunately, there are some simple practices everyone can do to help prevent pollution by keeping animal waste out of the water. While it may seem easier to ignore the

problem of animal waste, remember that you are protecting not only the environment but also your own health.

### ***Keeping Animal Waste Out of the Water***

1. Pick up after your pet. Preventing water pollution can be as simple as remembering to take along a plastic bag or pooper scooper when you walk your dog. For both “quality of life” and public health reasons, many communities actually have laws requiring anyone taking their animal off of their property to immediately clean up the waste after the pet relieves itself. Your choices once you have picked up the waste include:
  - Flush it down the toilet so the septic system or sewage treatment plant will treat it in the same manner as human waste.
  - Put it in the trash. This is less effective, as waste that ends up in a landfill may still cause pollution problems. Putting animal waste in the trash is actually against the law in some communities.
  - Bury it in your yard. The microorganisms in the soil will break down the waste and release the nutrients to nearby plants. Make sure the hole is at least five inches deep and located away from vegetable gardens, children’s play areas, or any lake, stream, wetland, well or ditch. CAUTION: Don’t bury waste in your compost pile. The pile does not get hot enough to kill the pathogens and using the compost could cause illness.
  - Install an underground pet waste digester. These function like small septic tanks. Before buying one, check for local laws that may restrict their use or location.
2. Keep your yard clean. While there are no laws requiring you to clean up animal waste on your own property, there are good reasons to be careful where you leave it to decay. Some diseases can be transmitted from pet waste to humans through soil contact. Children who play outside and adults that garden are most at risk for infection, so cleaning up waste from play and garden areas is especially important. Washing hands with anti-bacterial soap and water after working or playing in the dirt is the best protection from disease.

Some of the more common waste-borne diseases and their symptoms are the following. *Campylobacteriosis* causes diarrhea in humans. *Salmonellosis* has symptoms including fever, headache, vomiting and diarrhea. *Toxocariasis* is a roundworm that may cause a rash, fever, and cough or vision loss. *Toxoplasmosis*, a protozoan parasite that can cause severe birth defects if a woman becomes infected during pregnancy, is the reason pregnant women are told to avoid handling used kitty litter. This parasite can also cause problems for people with weak immune systems. Symptoms include headache, muscle aches and lymph node enlargement.

3. Don’t feed waterfowl. While one of the pleasures of a trip to the park has always been taking stale bread to feed the ducks, the environmental and health impacts of this activity for both humans and birds can be serious. While ducks, geese and

swans all love bread, it lacks in the nutrients and roughage of their natural diet. Feeding these birds bread is similar to feeding a small child a diet of candy and soda; they may love it, but it does them no good and may cause long-term health problems.

Feeding waterfowl also tends to cause the birds to concentrate in numbers higher than can be supported by the natural food supplies. This can cause problems in the winter months when fewer people come to the park or shore with food. There have been cases where swans were so used to being fed at a particular location that they remained in the area long after the feeding stopped, became too weak to fly someplace with a better food supply, and eventually died of starvation. These large flocks of birds also create large quantities of waste and the serious water pollution problems described earlier in this fact sheet.

4. Dispose of kitty litter properly. When cleaning out the litter box, a two-step approach is most effective. Cat waste may be scooped out and flushed down the toilet, and the used litter should be bagged, sealed and placed in the trash. Dumping the entire contents of the litter box down your toilet will cause plumbing problems and prematurely fill up your septic tank or sewer system with indigestible material, but sending untreated cat waste to the landfill can cause pollution problems.

While it may not seem like a big deal if one more dog, cat or bird “contributes” some waste to the neighborhood environment, think about how many animals there are out there. Animal waste may not be the biggest or most toxic pollutant going into your local waters, but it is one of those little problems that, when all the pieces are added together, lead to serious environmental and health problems. So please think twice about your pet’s bathroom habits and do your part to help keep our waters and environment clean.

(Source: Clean Water Fact Sheet, produced by Non-Point Education for Municipal Officials (NEMO) and Sea Grant Connecticut)