



# Pet Waste and Water Quality

**Storm water samples collected in Wisconsin cities almost always have high levels of bacteria which violate water quality standards. Common sources of bacteria include sanitary sewer overflows, pets and urban wildlife.**

**P**et owners, take heed... When you clean up after your pet, do you dump the waste in the street or storm sewer? Do you leave it to decay on the sidewalk or the grass near the street? If so, you may be causing pollution or health problems.

## *Are you polluting our Lakes and streams?*

Pollutants from improperly disposed pet waste may be washed into storm sewers by rain or melting snow. Storm sewers usually drain *directly* into our lakes and streams, carrying many pollutants along with the water.

Pollutants commonly found in urban lakes, streams and ponds include:

- Pet Waste
- Oil and antifreeze
- Sediment
- Toxic chemicals
- Pesticides and fertilizers

## *Are you risking your health?*

When pet waste is disposed of improperly, not only water quality suffers – your health may be at risk, too. Pets, 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:

**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. May 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, lymph node enlargement.



When pet waste is washed into lakes or streams the waste decays, using up oxygen and sometimes releasing ammonia. Low oxygen levels and ammonia combined with warm temperatures can kill fish.

Pet waste also contains nutrients that encourage weed and algae growth. Overly fertile water becomes cloudy and green – unattractive for swimming, boating and fishing.

Perhaps most importantly, pet waste carries diseases which make water unsafe for swimming or drinking.

Pet waste may not be the largest or most toxic pollutant in urban waterways, but it is one of the many little sources of pollution that add up to a big problem. Fortunately, there are some simple things we can all do to help keep our water clean. See the other side for ways to keep pet waste out of local waterways.

## YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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. What should you do with the waste you pick up? No solution is perfect, but here are the choices:

### 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 or stream.

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;
- Away from any lake, stream, ditch or well.

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

**Be cautious.** Keep pet waste away from vegetable gardens and water supplies to prevent disease. Don't add pet waste to your compost pile. The pile won't get hot enough to kill disease organisms in pet waste.

### 3 Put it in the trash . . .



Check local ordinances first. Putting pet waste in the trash is against the law in some communities. Even if legal and easy, it is not the best solution. Waste taken to 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.

## A few words of caution

**Around Your Home** – 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. They are the most frequent victims of diseases from pet waste. Of course, the best protection for children and adults is washing hands with soap and water.

**In Your Community** – 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 city or village clerk to find out more about local pet waste laws.

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