

Environmentally-friendly condom disposal ^[1]

Dear Alice,

What is the ecologically correct way to dispose of a used condom? One can't flush it down the toilet (as numerous Urban Legends demonstrate), and leaving it naked in the wastebasket strikes me as tacky... My impulse is to stick it in a brown paper bag and send it to the nearest land-fill (both semen and latex are bio-degradable).

Just how **does** one deal with the physical evidence that one has been caring and responsible? This randy little old lady wants to know!

— Over 50 in Florida

Answer

Dear Over 50 in Florida,

You're definitely right — flushing condoms down the toilet is a terrible idea. Condoms can clog your plumbing, or even end up in the water supply. If condoms are disposed of via the toilet, they are usually fished out early on in the water-recycling process and transported to a landfill. However, if not caught early, condoms can remain with other water waste and be sent out into the Atlantic, the Gulf, or some other large body of water.

As you correctly note, latex is biodegradable (when not under water, that is). It is an all-natural substance made from the sap of rubber trees. Latex condoms are not composed of 100 percent latex, though. Another material used to make condoms, lambskin, is also biodegradable, but it does not protect against sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV. Unfortunately, condoms made of polyurethane, a plastic material, do not break down at all. As of yet, no one has taken up the job of recycling these plastic items along with soda bottles and such, so don't throw them in the recycling bin!

Lubricant and/or spermicide coated on and/or added to latex and lambskin condoms, however, may also alter the decomposition potential of condoms. And, no one has studied how long it takes condoms — lubricated or not — to break down. Regardless of condom biodegradability, most landfills are over-capacity and do not provide the ideal environment nor the main ingredient,

air, necessary for effective decomposition.

Your suggestion of putting used condoms in a paper bag sounds like a good one for more pleasant and environmentally-friendly disposal. You could also use tissues or toilet paper to wrap up used condoms — they are biodegradable, too. Plastic bags, however, do not break down over time, so it would be ineffective to throw away your used condoms in these.

On the plus side, semen and other bodily fluids will decompose in the environment, as you mentioned.

Another thing to think about is condom packaging. You can recycle the paperboard boxes that condoms come in with mixed paper, but individual condoms are usually wrapped in plastic or foil. You cannot recycle either of these materials, and neither will break down in a landfill. If you search online, you'll find some interesting ideas people have for reusing these wrappers (especially the foil ones), if you can't bear to banish them to a landfill.

Perhaps someday condom manufacturers will figure out ways to use recyclable or biodegradable packaging materials for their products. But for now, the little bit of foil or plastic you have to throw away and the thought that the condom will take a long time to decompose in a landfill seem like small prices to pay for the protection that condoms offer.

Alice!

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