FACT SHEET - WIPES

Wipes: Background & Development
What are wet wipes?
Wipes are a hygiene product that safeguards consumer health and are essential to how we live today. Cleansing wipes are used for domestic, industrial and medical cleaning; and for bodily hygiene uses including baby care, facial and intimate personal cleansing. Recent decades have seen the exponential development of a wide range of cleansing wipe products for numerous applications. Wipes have become an important cleaning commodity category. This began in 1950s with the invention of the first saturated paper cleaning product, it was designed for cleaning on the go and ease of use and disposal. Manufacturers realised that transportable and disposable cleansing wipes could address a range of consumer needs. By modifying the product components of wipes, including cleansing lotions and base materials, wipes could be developed to address multiple consumer hygiene requirements. For instance, while domestic and industrial wipes require durable materials to ensure integrity for tough surface cleaning, baby and facial wipes have been developed with softness and sensitivity for skincare needs. Wipes can be packaged individually but are generally marketed in bulk with easy-access packaging and convenient reseal tabs to prevent loss of moisture. The wipe market we know today began to emerge about 25 years age. The first flushable wipes were introduced 15 years ago; and a decade ago the industry introduced its first guidelines on the 'flush-ability' of wet wipe products.

Disposal of wipes
"Do Not Flush"
Manufacturers of wipes should clearly label the products to inform consumers twice about the appropriate disposal methods for single-use wipes – the labelling and communication requirements are set out in the EDANA Code of Practice Edana stresses that wipe products should only be disposed of in accordance with the guidelines outlined on packaging. Wipes marked 'flushable' do not contains 'plastics' and non-biodegradable synthetic polymers and are therefore designed to breakdown quickly upon entering a water sewage system. But over 90% of wipe products contain non-biodegradable materials, therefore Edana advocates a 'Do Not Flush' policy. We recommend that consumers refrain from flushing used wipes into municipal sewage systems. Instead, single-use wipes should be binned for correct disposed by local authorities. Edana is working with various stakeholders to mitigate issues and prevent any negative environmental impact that might result from inappropriate disposal of wipes.

The Benefits of wet wipes

The success of wipes as a product category is based on the convenience with which they can be transported and used. This is due in part to their compact size and durable packaging.

The physical integrity and efficiency of wipes addresses a fundamental hygiene need for an increasing mobile global society by replacing the traditional cloth and fluid combination required for sanitary cleaning.

Wipes are durable, efficient and cost-effective – a single wipe can complete a cleaning task, which mitigates excessive product use. Access to wipes makes it easier for consumers to maintain or raise personal hygiene standards and levels of cleanliness and sanitation in the domestic environment, in public or in a medical setting.

The primary important of wipes as a product centres on the hygiene and health benefits they deliver. Single use wipes remove and prevent the spread of harmful pathogens, hence promoting health and wellbeing. The domestic and medical use of wipes plays an important part in preventing the spread of potentially fatal infections.

Clinical research has also demonstrated that disposable baby wipes deliver greater benefits for skin health, including reduced irritation and a better skin barrier and pH balance, relative to the traditional cloth and liquid cleaning method.

The composition of wet wipes

Not all wet wipes are made from the same materials. But the key component of all wet wipes is a nonwoven fabric. Nonwoven fabrics are engineered materials made form synthetic polymers (e.g. polyester, polypropylene and polyethylene) rayon, wood pulp or cotton.

As the market for wipes has grown by addressing diverse consumer needs, a greater range of base materials (substrates) has been developed.

Each individual wipe is moistened with water-based cleaning and moisturising agents to allow them to clean without the aid of additional water or cleaning agents.

Additional wipe ingredients include gentle preservative agents to prevent microbial contamination prior to use, while problematic preservatives have been identified and removed from commercial wipe composition

The inclusion of surfactants in baby wipes allows for the more effective removal of faeces, while the presence of emollients help to reduce mechanical skin irritation.

Depending on the intended use, many wipe products are marketed as scented or fragrance free.

Nonwoven fabrics and base materials are formed into single-use wipe sheets.

How are wet wipes made?

While the wipe category of cleaning products continues to grow and vary depending on intended application, there are three basic processes employed in the manufacture of wipes:

Wipes are produced by combining multiple categories of fibres through a combination of chemical, thermal and manufacturing processes

A range of active ingredients are added to the base materials (depending on the intended use of the product) – this can include the use of purified water and / or heat

The wipes are completed by cutting and folding into a standard size and shape before being packaged

The manufacturing processes involved in the production of wipes is constantly evolving with the introduction of new technologies for improved product performance and increased production efficiency with reduced manufacturing waste.

Safety Assurance and Sustainability

The materials used in the composition of wipes must be fit for purpose and safe for human use while being safe in terms of production and disposal. Therefore, when correctly used and disposed of, wipes are safe for consumers and the environment.

Edana oversees the nonwoven industry and works to provide clear guidelines to its members and consumers to promote the responsible use of wipes and the correct disposal of single-use wipes. Its primary concern is to ensure that wipes are fit for purpose, and quality and safety of the product is upheld and extended.

Edana believes in collaboration with industry authorities to promote consumer education on the correct disposal of wipes to minimise the negative environmental impact of product use.

Edana members are fully committed to sustainability in terms of the whole-life performance of their wipe products. They are fully compliant with EDANA's GD4 guidelines on product manufacturing, testing and labelling standards.

Several EU states have backed industry standards outlined by Edana for assessing the correct disposal method or flushability of wipes. In addition, wipes marketed in the EU must be fully compliant with regulations including the General Product Safety Directive, the Cosmetic Products Directive, the Detergents Regulation, the Biocidal Products Directive and the Medical Devices Directive.

Edana believes that through information and education, consumers can be helped to use and dispose of wipes correctly. By encouraging consumers not to flush single-use wipes, blockages in sewage systems can be prevented along with the attendant environmental harm. This will can ensure that consumer continue to enjoy the convenience, safety and health benefits that single-use wipes provide.

What consumers need to know

- Where to check packaging for wipe disposal instructions
- The difference between flushable and non-flushable wipes
- What to do when a wipe packaging displays a 'Do Not Flush' icon
- That biodegradable does not mean compostable or green bin disposable
- That wipes should only be use for the purpose intended as outlined by directions outlined on the product packaging
- How to correctly dispose of biodegradable wipes
- That wipes should be disposed of correctly and immediately after use to minimise risk of contamination or cross-infection.
- Wipes are safe for use on intact skin but should not be used when skin is irritated or broken
- To prevent irritation, skin should be thoroughly dried after using a wipe