

Boating with Missy

By Melissa Gervais

The Tissue Issue

The other day I was walking down the dock and saw a woman with a Ziploc bag full of toilet paper (not on the roll, if you get my drift). I was curious and asked, to which she replied, "We do not put any toilet paper in our head." I had not heard of this practice before, so my initial response was surprise. She explained that there were four adults onboard, which meant that they would have to untie or pull anchor every couple of days to empty the head. Without putting toilet paper in the head, they could almost triple that.

I could see the argument, but wondered if this process just created more garbage aboard. That aside, it got me to thinking if toilet paper really does take up that much room in a holding tank. If it does, which is the best toilet paper for boaters?

As with most potentially lifestyle-altering decisions, I poured a libation and set off down the dock to find my friends and get to the bottom of this. I explained what I had just witnessed and the group was quite shocked except for one woman, who I have been boating with forever. "Same here, no TP in the head," she countered.

How did I miss this? She started to explain that they originally used a marine-specific, one-ply toilet paper but found that it was far too thin.

The crew voted and they preferred to use a regular land-based toilet paper which filled the head very quickly, so they opted not to flush. However, they kept the one-ply onboard for guests, which made me laugh. Also, good to know.

According to a study by Charmin toilet paper company, the average consumer uses 8.6 sheets per trip to the washroom, that's a total of 57 sheets per day with a typical roll lasting five days. Nowadays, pretty much all toilet papers break down well in septic systems. However, thinner is better. A one-ply toilet paper will break down much easier and is best in recreational vehicles and boats. It isn't as soft or thick as household toilet paper, but it is much friendlier to your holding tank.

Also, specifically labelled biodegradable toilet paper dissolves faster, requiring less water than standard toilet paper. Remember that in addition to the head itself, your system may have a macerator on the pump which empties the holding tank. It is important to use a toilet paper that dissolves quickly so it doesn't form clumps, clog the system, and block efforts to empty the holding tank.

All these claims and theories call for some scientific data. I asked the group what brand they use and choose three different ones to test: Dometic SeaLand one-ply rapid dissolving, Majesta Soft E-Z flush, and Purex Premium toilet paper. It was time for a roll down. (Sidenote: *Northwest Yachting* invites readers to try Missy's experiment at home with any of their favorite brands of toilet paper.)

We lined up three clear glasses filled with water and dropped two sheets of each brand in its own glass. With a quick swirl, we could see that all three were starting to dissolve. We waited. After 20 minutes, we could see that all three brands had done a pretty good job of breaking down. However, we decided to lift out the blob and see if it was really dissolved. Immediately we noticed that the SeaLand weighed twice as much as the other two and seemed to take up more space. Very interesting.

Now that we had established the dissolvability and macerator-friendly qualities, it was time to look at what we were actually putting in the pump-out tank or flushing in the ocean. I was shocked to find that some of the best-selling toilet papers and paper towels are not made using sustainable processes. Also, many contain toxic dyes, bleach, and perfume. Not good.

Sustainable process products that use recycled components, avoid harmful bleaching processes, or engage in more sensible practices include Seventh Generation, Trader Joe's regular toilet paper, Earth First, and Cashmere/Purex EnviroCare. Products that rely on forest fiber and have a much larger carbon footprint include Kirkland, Charmin Ultra, and Quilted Northern. For a one-time use product, it seems ridiculous to me that we should be cutting down trees only to flush them down the toilet.

When I stopped that women on the dock, I had no idea what I was about to learn. That is the beauty of the curious mind. Sometimes I buy products based on price or in bulk at Costco, but that is about to change. I am going to immediately pay attention every time I buy toilet paper for both my boat and my house. As Maya Angelou says, "When you know better, do better."
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Missy grew up boating with her family in the Gulf Islands. She works for a yacht services company based in Vancouver, B.C. and boats most weekends from April to October. A self-proclaimed weekend warrior, she enjoys blogging about everything cool for women who boat at missygoesboating.com.