

The Albemarle County Service Authority has deemed February “Grease Awareness Month.” Our goal is to increase awareness of the problems caused by improper disposal of fats, oils and grease (FOG). As these bi-products of daily life work their way into the sewer system, they attach to the insides of sewer pipes, causing line blockages and sometimes sewer system overflows. This discharge of untreated wastewater into our environment is the number one cause of waterways pollution according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. We can all do our part to reduce the occurrence of these problems by keeping FOG out of our sewers.

Many of us were reared in homes where, under the kitchen sink lived an old jar or juice container filled with a greasy, gelatinous, cream-colored glob. As children, we wondered why our parents would dare save such a disgusting looking concoction. As we grew old enough to help with kitchen tasks, we quickly learned about grease. That jar was the remains of Sunday morning’s bacon and eggs breakfast, and Tuesday night’s spaghetti and meatball dinner. Our parents taught us our first science lesson of how a liquid could become a solid as it cooled. They explained how troublesome it would be if this change of state took place in the pipes below the kitchen sink. Somewhat surprised, and quite a bit revolted, we understood the lesson, and vowed never to dump grease in the kitchen sink.

This quickly became habit and second-nature, and when we were grown with kitchens of our own, we too placed those grease jars under the sink. Then something happened. Doctors began telling us we should avoid bacon and egg breakfasts, and that deep-frying foods was not to be done.

Pretty soon we were producing less and less grease, and those little jars under the sink were needed so infrequently that it was almost not worth keeping one. After all, with as little fat and grease as we are now consuming, what could it hurt to just dump it down the drain?

Unfortunately, it can hurt a lot. Whether you have a septic field or are on public sewer, adding grease to the system can result in a sewage back-up that at best would be a major inconvenience, and at worst, could result in costly damage to your home.

Others of us still know better than to dump any FOG down the kitchen sink and instead think it best to flush it away, down the toilet. While at first glance it seems reasonable to send the “really gross stuff” down the toilet, the reality is that our plumbing is not separated. No matter if grease goes down the kitchen sink or the bathroom toilet, it all ends up in the same place, attached to the inside of a sewer line.

The lesson taught to us in our childhood kitchen is one that ought not be forgotten. A little grease here, and a little there adds up over time. Grease will

not dissipate and go away. Once grease enters a septic or sewer system, its only way out is through pumping and removal of the solid. Commercial additives claiming to dissolve grease only pass it further down the line.

Admittedly, not everyone abandoned the grease collection system, nor high fat foods for that matter, and those folks are proudly thinking that while their doctors might not be pleased, they at least have a septic or sewer free of grease. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Many of our parents neglected to tell us that grease comes from places other than bacon.

Meat as well as vegetable scraps, salad dressings, butter and cooking oils all deposit grease that quickly solidifies and over time builds up in pipes. To minimize the amount of grease entering a system, garbage disposals should not be used for any products with grease, and a paper towel or spatula should be used to wipe-off plates and pans before they are rinsed in the sink or placed in the dishwasher.

These are habits very few of us practice but that all of us could benefit from adopting. This month, as we celebrate Grease Awareness Month, vow to adjust your grease management practices. Save a can with a lid. When you have grease to dispose of, pour it into the can, snap on the lid and store the can in the refrigerator. Once the grease has solidified, pull it from the freezer, toss the can and reuse the lid. With your help, the Albemarle County Service Authority can minimize the occurrence of costly and time-consuming sewer blockages.