

Publication Date: 1 February 2023

YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 347. How to Solve Blockages Caused by “Not-So-Flushable” Toilet Wipes – with The Drain Man

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Intro: Welcome to Your Strata Property, the podcast for property owners looking for reliable, accurate, and bite-sized information from an experienced and authoritative source.

Amanda Farmer: Hello and welcome to this week's podcast episode. I'm your host, Amanda Farmer, and my guest this week is Jonathan Nykel. Jonathan joined the Drain Man as a general plumber back in 2015 to specialise in clearing and relining drains. Over the years, Jonathan has cleared more than 6,000 drains, seeing, he says "the worst of the worst and the downright nasty." In this time, Jonathan has saved many trees from being cut down or concrete being cut up and replaced with the drain man's ability to realign drains without digging. Jonathan's experience has led him to move into the business development team, to work closely with strata managers, property managers, trades, and facilities managers, providing long-term solutions to help avoid unnecessary digging. I'm going to take you right over now to my chat with Jonathan Nykel of The Drain Man.

Jonathan Nykel, welcome to the show.

Jonathan Nykel: Good day, Amanda, how you going? Thank you for having me on board.

Amanda Farmer: I'm doing well. Thank you for being here. Jonathan, tell us a little bit about who you are and what your company does.

Jonathan Nykel: Sure. I'm a plumber, first and foremost, who's moved his way into the office to help with our business development team and build our relationships with strata managers. Previously to working in the office, I was out in the field with The Drain Man. We were clearing drains and relining drains for the last sort of 7 years. And in the last year, I've hung out in the office and out in the road meeting with strata managers and owners corporations to sort of discuss the benefits of clearing and relining drains with The Drain Man.

Amanda Farmer: Excellent. You are one of those very, very important service providers that we have in strata. I know I was just dealing with an email just today from my own strata manager and in a discussion with my committee about some urgent plumbing work that needs to be done leaking. I said, "Yes, definitely call our plumber." I know many owners, strata managers who are listening will be excited and interested to be hearing from you. I'm not sure we've had a plumber on the show before. Tell me this, Jonathan, why does it seem to be such a challenge for our residential strata buildings? We're going to talk about today, residential strata buildings to properly look after their plumbing. Why are we always calling plumbers about problem drains?

Jonathan Nykel: Look, I think it really comes down to, so if you're not mowing the lawns not keeping up the garden. People notice that and they want to get it fixed. The plumbing typically is hidden behind walls. Underground, just in hard to access places. If it's not affecting me, I don't want to worry about it, but typically we find that we will get the call once something's happened. The drain's overflowed, something's leaking, something smells funny, and usually there's one or two unfortunate people who have to deal with the overflow because they're the lowest point in the system. If you think of a drain, for example, everything obviously runs downhill, and then whoever's just up from that blockage is going to cop it the most. The people at the higher end of the drain, they may not want to know too much about it because really they don't even know that it's blocked. I think that might be part of the reason why some are more so affected than the others and it can be a bit hard. It's always a grudge. By fixing drains, it typically doesn't improve the look of the property, but it is very vital, obviously, to get rid of that waste.

Amanda Farmer: And very expensive. Is that the assumption that your clients: owners, corporation, strata managers may have when there is a problem with drainage? "Oh no. Oh my goodness. What are we going to be up for? Let's try and ignore this for as long as we can." Do you see that?

Jonathan Nykel: Yes, yes, absolutely. Plumbers and electricians, we're notorious, are being told "You're so expensive, you're always charging more than everyone else." Give you a little story. We had a job where there was this huge gum tree. It would've

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been taller than a two storey house out the back of this property, and it kept on causing blockages in the sewer. Just the regular plumber who would come along and look after all aspects of the plumbing on the property had proposed to have the tree removed, dig up the drain and replace it. The drain was about two and a half metres deep on that one, and it was going to end up costing them about 30 grand, the quote came to remove the tree, dig down and fix it, you know, can't replace the tree. The tree's gone from that point, and part of the fence had to be removed to do that as well. In comparison, we were able to come in, clean out the drain and then reline it, but it was just shy of 10 grand. There can be some significant savings there, but the first thought is, "Yes, plumbing, it's going to be expensive and let's just hold off and keep getting it cleared instead." But that also has it's problems as well.

Amanda Farmer: Now, this is what captured my attention, Jonathan, when I looked into what you guys were doing. You talk about in some of the material on your website, relining or rehabilitating drains, and that story that you've just told us is a perfect example of you coming in and doing that. Is that, how does that work? Is that possible in strata buildings? Look, maybe I'm not in the loop, but I think it's the first time that I've heard about it.

Jonathan Nykel: Basically, as long as we can get to the high side of the pipe, so a toilet, for example, we can remove the actual toilet seat and get our equipment into the drain there. That's pretty much all we need so with our cameras and locators, we can push them through the pipe work and then locate where the blockage is, which is important because if it's a couple of hundred mil deep underneath grass, then in that instance we'd say, "Well, why don't we just dig this up? It's very shallow and we can fix it. Now while we're on aresite, it's done." But if it's underneath concrete or running through a footing of a two-story building, that's another story.

The easiest way to explain it is it's like a stent for your drain. We insert a sleeve and inflate it over the damaged area. We can do that a few different ways. We can push a new sleeve in and inflate it and cure it with steam, which is really, really quick. If you've got lots of properties that can't stop using, say, toilets or showers or whatever it is, then that can be a good alternative to say, a longer curing product. It really sort of depends on the situation, but essentially we use ropes and our cameras to pull the new pipe, which is the reline, into position and inflate it. In a nutshell. There are obviously challenges in that, but that's the basic version of it.

Amanda Farmer: Now, the example I have for you is selfishly, once again, one that's been happening on a recurring basis in my building, and that is the drains blocking because of flushable, but not so flushable, apparently, toilet wipes, and I'm talking about a 1970s building. That's how old the pipes are, and I do know that our plumber recently went in with a camera, explored all the pipes, and as you say, it's all blocking up at the end of the line. The people down in the bottom apartments sadly have suffered, I think twice now, which has been awful for them. And our plumber has shown us the footage where he said, "This is the point in the pipe where the flushable, not so flushable wipes, are catching on the old pipe." And I'm not sure we've got to the solution yet, but I think what you are saying, Jonathan, am I right, this would be the perfect example where you could reline just that part of the pipe to make those wipes then flow through and not get caught and therefore not block?

Jonathan Nykel: Absolutely. Yes, the beauty of relining is it's sectional. Typically we would, back in the day when we dig everything up is if you had one small section, you may as well replace the whole lot because it's more cost-effective while you've got the equipment there that to dig it all up. Whereas with relining, we can just do one small section. The minimum size that we need to do is about a metre to fit in with the standards. In your example here, Amanda, where there's just one little section that keeps on catching the wipes, we could easily cover that and make a smooth surface. I mean, there's no such thing in my mind of flushable wipes,

Amanda Farmer: Oh, it's terrible. It's terrible that they're allowed to advertise and sell them that way. And of course, we've told residents, "Please don't use them. Our old plumbing can't cope." But I know there has actually been court litigation. I'm not sure if it was in Australia now or overseas about this claim that these wipes were flushable because they're causing problems in many buildings, I know.

Jonathan Nykel: Absolutely. I read that same article, and to be honest, I was shocked that it sort of just stopped where it got to

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because we've proved over and over again that they're not flushable and the impact that it has on the waste system. I know Sydney Water pulled out, I think it was a kilometre long fatberg from wet wipes that just catch all that fat. And the same thing can happen to a smaller degree, obviously within a strata situation where it's not uncommon.

Amanda Farmer: And when it's a sewer that is then overflowing into somebody's home, that impact is huge that that's carpet having to come up, flooring have to having to come up, people having to move out. It is a bit different to maybe not being able to go into the office for a few days.

Jonathan Nykel: Absolutely. And that sort of brings up a point of if, say for instance, you did have to cut up the concrete inside of a building on a bottom floor to get to a pipe, well, we have to then move everyone out, whereas if we're able to reline it, I mean, they can stay there. They can be eating their breakfast while the guys just installing the reline and be done by the end of the day. So it's lots of benefits of relining over digging, especially in strata.

Amanda Farmer: Is this new technology, Jonathan, are many plumbers able to do this? Is this something that you guys are really strong on in the market? Give me a little background to this solution.

Jonathan Nykel: Sure. It's not new as such. The Drain Man has been relining drains for the last 20 years, I'd say in the last 10 to 12 years, it's become increasingly popular amongst plumbers to have a go themselves. The supplies popping up who sell product to anyone who wants to come in and purchase it. Up until only a few years ago, there wasn't any regulations around how relining was to be installed in Australia. Recently they've actually developed some standards that we have to adhere to do the right thing. It's good that they're starting to become more talk about it in the industry. I think it's one of those things where people sort of go, "Oh, I can do this. That's a lot easier than digging up a drain." But look, we've learned firsthand over 20 years what can make or break people really.

Because at the end of the day, we're talking about putting a rubber device that inflates to open up a resin filled felt underground. If you don't make the correct assumptions and calculations, then if that pops well, all of a sudden instead of having a nice open reline, it's now collapsed and very difficult to get out. I think it's one of those things you got to really make sure whether we do it or whether someone else does it, that they know what they're doing and that if something does go wrong, cause we are human, things can go wrong over time if there's a procedure in place to be able to fix that promptly. Because if you've got 30 people coming home from work who want to use a toilet and they can't, that's a problem.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, sure would be. Now, Jonathan, when you are proposing a drain rehabilitation or relining to a client, do you have any typical questions around that? Any challenges that you have to overcome? What do your clients want to know when you're making this suggestion?

Jonathan Nykel: I guess the most common question is "How long is it going to last? Why should I get this done over digging?" It's going to last a lot longer than digging. We guarantee our product for 50 years. I don't think there's actually any longer guarantee in the industry. Typically, it ranges from sort of 10 years up to, I think 40. I think there might be a couple others that offer 50 now, but that's how long we offer. The other one is, people sort of get stuck in the old mindset of, "Well, digging it up, I can get to the pipe, I can put my hands on it and actually fix it." People seem to be a little bit scared of technology, but I'll always find after about half an hour of walking around site and talking about it, I don't often get people who say, "No, I'm not too sure. I think I still want to dig it up." Especially once you start talking through that.

Because if you're digging up concrete, well, yes, you get to the pipe, but then you got to reinstate the concrete. Then you've got a big trench that's got fresh concrete running up a driveway. The reinstatement is massive when you have to do substantial dig. I drove past somewhere the other day and they literally had ripped up the whole entire driveway, the whole car park out the back, and no one could park there through the whole process of replacing all the drains. It's not just the time of doing the job, it's ripping it all up, replacing it. It's a massive inconvenience.

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Amanda Farmer: This relining is an alternative to otherwise repairing an existing drain. It's not an alternative to completely replacing an old drain that just is not going to serve a building anymore. There would be some situations with there where the drains just have to come out.

Jonathan Nykel: Yes, there are some situations, that once the drain gets to a point where it's totally misaligned. We've had situations where you might have one pipe coming in here and another one that's meant to be coming in here, here, but they've now shifted. Now we do have equipment to be able to cut that section out and put a sleeve through there, but it gets to a point where, depending on how bad it is, whether or not it's actually worth the investment to spend the money doing a trenchless option. Because if it's going to take three weeks to reopen that pipe keyhole style, without digging it up, I might take a day or two to dig it up. And in that instance, it might be a better option then to dig it up and replace it. But I always say to people, "Look, if you don't want to dig it up, we can definitely find a way to do it." But sometimes it can take time to do it, but it comes down to what's the preference.

Amanda Farmer: And if you had the option to repair a drain that, and forgive my layperson ignorance, but if the drain was damaged somehow it had a hole in it. Not your misaligned example, but it's old, it's got a hole in it, and the sleeve option I imagine would be great for that. But otherwise, the option is to dig it up and repair it. How does that repair work? What do you do to fix a hole in a drain when you dig it up?

Jonathan Nykel: I'll use the example of an old terracotta drain because that's probably where you're going to find a hole. To join onto a terracotta or unwind is a technical term. The only way to actually join onto it is with rubber joiners, which I mean, you might embed it with concrete as well to try and seal it better. But you're relying on that rubber joint to stop tree roots growing through and to really hold it in position. You obviously got to support the drain too, but that would be the typical way to repair that with section of PVC through the middle. There's two weak points. Now it's more of a bandaid, and at the end of the day, it only needs to be guaranteed for the life of the certificate of compliance, which is only about 7 years, which if you realign it, if you've got 50 years of not having to worry about it and it's completely sealed, it's still got that the existing pipe work on the outside of the reline as added structure as well.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. Well, it sounds like a no-brainer to me if you have that option, Jonathan, you've given us at least one success story, which I always like to hear. Have you got any other stories, case studies that you can share with our audience?

Jonathan Nykel: Yes, sure. The one that sort of comes to mind is this started about a year before we actually did the work. We'd been contacted by one of our strata managers who had had someone look at the drain and had been told that there was movement within the building and it could have been affected by the drains leaking into the ground. We went out and had a look. We sort of allowed a couple of hours to try and get through as much as we could and just give a real overview of, "Well, this is what we're seeing and this is what we think we need to do from here based on what we're seeing." We're able to get through all of the sewer, which was fairly good condition. However, the storm water was 90% blocked. Now there's about 80 metres of storm water drain that we've worked out after clearing it all.

You can imagine that we're trying to see anything in these 80 metres and we can't see anything. We presented the option to clean out that stormwater drain and do a really good thorough inspection to see if there are lots of breaks and whether or not that water could be leaking out into the ground and effecting the movement. After about two days of cleaning, we managed to have the whole drain completely clear, and we got the cameras for every section of it. I think the video file that we recorded, which was what we actually give this to every customer that we work for went for about 35 minutes. There's lots of camera work through the drain, but we located every problem, every break. Some of them were on straight sections of pipe, some of them were around bends. And then there was actually a few where the T piece, so where that down pipe might join into the main drain, that intersection was broken as well, which is a pretty high stress point for movement.

Now, once we relined all of this drain, the whole system had been covered. Every single part of that drain was now new, and they could then rest assure that, all right, well, the drains are all completely sealed, which is one part that needs to be done because

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they, they're just going to block up again and there was no chance for the water to actually leak out. But from start. When we started this job, I think it was the end of 2021, we had four or five site visits with a few of the key members of the committee who would always have lots of questions for me. There was an engineer involved, and they're great because once you've told the engineer and answered their questions, they then would present that to the rest of the committee.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, fantastic.

Jonathan Nykel: There was a a lot of communication. It was a long process, but at the end of the day, we were able to get a really good result for them.

Amanda Farmer: Sounds good. And with a 50 year warranty on that drain now, I guess.

Jonathan Nykel: Absolutely.

Amanda Farmer: Nice one. All right. Look, I think we have some very excited listeners who would love to know how to get in touch with you, Jonathan, find out more about what The Drain Man's doing. Which states are you serving? First of all, where can we find you? Which parts of Australia?

Jonathan Nykel: So we're based in Melbourne, Victoria, and we're also in New South Wales as well. It all can come through our website. We've got an inquiries email through there. So that's www.thedrainman.com.au. Or if you want to reach out to me directly, I can point you in the right direction to our New South Wales business development reps and go from there. So my email address would be Jonathan, which is J O N A T H A N, at thedrainman.com.au.

Amanda Farmer: That's it. I'm sure you will have plenty reaching out to you. We'll have those links and Jonathan's email address. You might be regretting that, Jonathan, in our show notes for this episode. You can find those over on the website at yourstrataproperty.com.au/podcasts. Great chat. Thank you so much, Jonathan, for coming on the show, demystifying strata plumbing for us, and giving our owners and our strata managers another option in times of great distress often.

Jonathan Nykel: Thanks for having me, it's been a pleasure.

Amanda Farmer: Thanks, Jonathan. Thank you.

Outro: Thank you for listening to Your Strata Property, the podcast which consistently delivers to property owners reliable and accurate information about their strata property. You can access all the information below this episode via the show notes at www.yourstrataproperty.com.au. You can also ask questions in the comments section, which Amanda will answer in her upcoming episodes. How can Amanda help you today?