

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/opinion/toilet-paper-hoarding-bidets.html?searchResultPosition=1>

Stop Using Toilet Paper

Why are we hoarding it when experts agree that rinsing with water is more sanitary and environmentally sound?

By [Kate Murphy](#)

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(No Model.)

S. WHEELER.
TOILET PAPER ROLL.

Patented Dec. 22, 1891

No. 465,588.

Fig. 1.

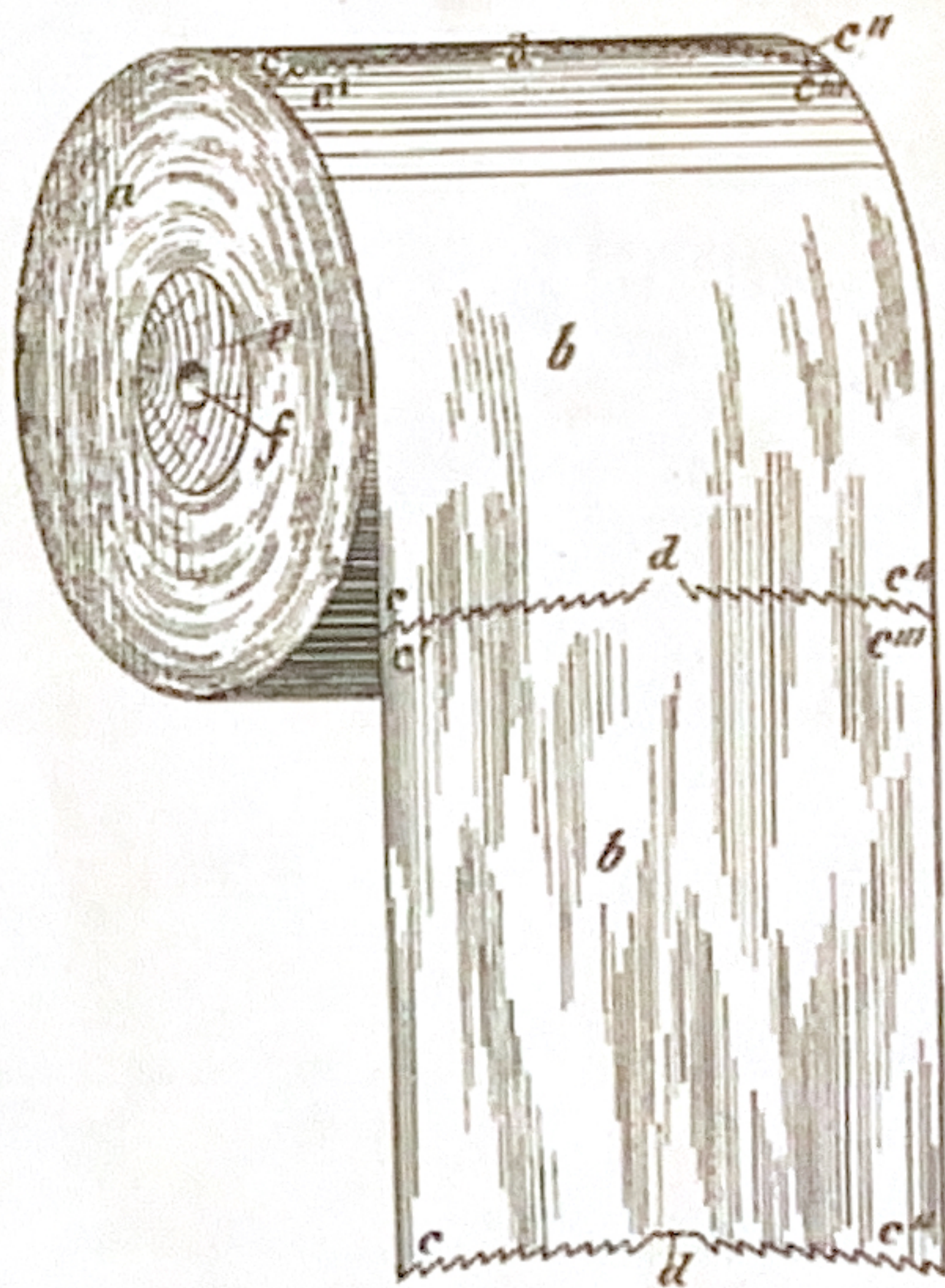


Fig. 2.



WITNESSES:

John Decker

INVENTOR.

Seth Wheeler.

THE UNITED STATES PATENT OFFICE, WASHINGTON, D. C.

In 1891, Seth Wheeler patented rolled and perforated toilet paper. Seth Wheeler

While the coronavirus pandemic is affecting us all differently depending on where we live, our financial situation and our basic health, one universal is the difficulty finding toilet paper.

Panic buying of toilet paper has spread around the globe as rapidly as the virus, even though there have been no disruptions in supply and the symptoms of Covid-19 are primarily respiratory, not gastrointestinal. In many stores, you can still readily find food, but nothing to wipe yourself once it's fully digested.

This is all the more puzzling when you consider that toilet paper is an antiquated technology that infectious disease and colorectal specialists say is neither efficient nor hygienic. Indeed, it dates back at least as far as the [sixth century](#), when a Chinese scholar wrote that he "dared not" use paper from certain classical texts for "toilet purposes."

Before paper was invented, or readily available, people used leaves, seashells, fur pelts and corn cobs. The ancient Greeks and Romans used small ceramic disks and also sponges on the ends of sticks, which were then plunged into a bucket of vinegar or salt water for the next person to use. We know this thanks to Philippe Charlier, a forensic anthropologist and archaeologist at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. His 2012 treatise, ["Toilet Hygiene in the Classical Era,"](#) published in the British Medical Journal, is perhaps the most widely cited text on the topic.

Dr. Charlier's specialty is microscopically analyzing [coprolite](#), fossilized feces. "It's not sexy," he said, "but when you study poo from 2000 B.C. you can get a lot of information about alimentation, digestion, health, genetics and migration of populations." You also find out what people used to clean their posteriors. Archaeologists examining coprolite from this year centuries hence might be perplexed to find remnants of magazines and [newspapers](#), which people have reportedly been using during the current toilet paper shortage.

Most toilet paper historians (there are more than you would think) credit Seth Wheeler with inventing modern toilet paper, perforated and on a roll, an idea he [patented](#) in 1891. The diagram on the patent application should put to rest any arguments about how to load the roll: The flap comes over the top and down the front. While manufacturers

might have added dyes, prints, perfumes and soothing aloe, toilet paper has remained pretty much the same ever since.

That is, unless you count the introduction of wet wipes. Originally intended for babies, they are now marketed aggressively to adults with gender specific brands like [Dude-Wipes](#) and [Queen V](#). Sales reached \$1.1 billion worldwide last year, up 35 percent from five years ago, according to Euromonitor International. The unfortunate result is that the wipes have begun to coalesce with grease in city sewer systems to form blockages the [size of airliners](#).

All this when experts agree that rinsing yourself with water is infinitely more sanitary and environmentally sound. Dr. H. Randolph Bailey, a colorectal surgeon at the University of Texas McGovern Medical School in Houston, recommended bidets or toilet attachments, such as the [Washlet](#) or [Tushy](#).

“A lot of people who come to see me have fairly significant irritation of their bottoms,” he said. “Most of the time it has to do with overzealous cleaning” — wiping too vigorously with toilet paper or using wipes, which often contain harsh fragrances and chemicals.

Moreover, he said, you’re just never going to get as clean as rinsing with water. Cleanliness matters, since you can get seriously ill from diseases transmitted via feces. Cholera, hepatitis, and E. coli and urinary tract infections are prime examples. [Recent studies](#) have found coronavirus in feces, as well.

But while [the majority of households in Japan](#) have high-tech toilets capable of cleansing users with precisely directed temperature-controlled streams of water, the rest of the world has been slow to follow.

Blame prudishness and puritanism, at least in part: Bidets, once ubiquitous in France, became associated with hedonism and licentiousness. Marie Antoinette had a [red-trimmed bidet](#) in her prison cell while awaiting the guillotine. And during World War II, American soldiers first saw bidets in French brothels, which made them think they were naughty. An often-told joke was that a wealthy American tourist in

Paris assumed the bidet in her hotel room was for washing babies in, until the maid told her, “No, madame, this is to [wash the babies out](#).”

But even in France, toilet paper has taken over. “Now, when constructing a new flat, nobody puts a bidet in it,” Dr. Charlier said. “There’s not room for it, particularly in Paris.” Although, when the bidet is incorporated in the toilet, as modern versions are, space is a nonissue. “Maybe there are also psychological reasons we do not embrace the newer technology,” he said.

Which brings us back to the panic buying of toilet paper. Psychologists say it’s more than a little Freudian, what with the [anal personality](#) being tied to a need for order, hoarding and fear of contamination. “The characteristics align with obsessive compulsive tendencies, which get triggered when people feel threatened,” said Nick Haslam, a professor of psychology at the University of Melbourne in Australia and the author of “Psychology in the Bathroom.”

Many people are low-level paper hoarders even in the best of times — stuffing takeout menus in kitchen drawers and piling months-old magazines on coffee tables. The pandemic may have just kicked this tendency into high gear, and people are likely latching onto toilet paper because it’s subconsciously associated with controlling filth and disease. “There’s also some evidence that animals hoard nesting materials,” Dr. Haslam said. “So maybe toilet paper has some sort of nesting component as we’re forced into our homes.”

It could also be that, having given up so much of our freedom, some feel, albeit subconsciously, that going without toilet paper would be an indignity too far — a “Mad Max” descent into the realm of the uncivilized. And so, stockpiling of Charmin and Angel Soft will likely continue, even though there are far better ways to clean ourselves and despite environmental groups’ warnings that we’re [flushing away our forests](#). No one wants to get caught without a roll within reach.

Kate Murphy is a journalist in Houston who contributes frequently to The New York Times and the author of “[You’re Not Listening: What You’re Missing and Why It Matters](#).”