

Coronavirus and shopping for supplies: Getting to the bottom of the toilet paper shortage

[Brent Schrottenboer](#) USA TODAY

On a recent Friday afternoon in western Iowa, a man was waiting in line to buy toilet paper at a local Dollar General store when another customer started giving the man grief about it, according to local police.

At issue was the amount of toilet paper being purchased. After feeling threatened by the other customer's aggressive behavior, the toilet paper buyer displayed a gun in self-defense.

“It escalated almost to the point of a physical confrontation,” Atlantic Iowa police Lt. Devin Hogue told USA TODAY.

In the end, neither person was injured, but the initial aggressor was charged this week with disorderly conduct, adding to the recent police blotter over bath tissue. In Florida last month, sheriff's deputies arrested a man for allegedly stealing 66 toilet paper rolls from a Marriott hotel. In California last week, Beverly Hills cops found 192 rolls of toilet paper in a stolen SUV.

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All are symptoms of the shortage during the COVID-19 pandemic – a supply shortfall caused by a surge in demand that goes beyond just panic buying and hoarding.

So why can't we find toilet paper yet?

Experts say empty store shelves also are caused by a fundamental shift in demand for a certain kind of toilet paper for use at home, as well as kinks in the supply chain between factories and stores.

Yet there is hope: Two of the main ingredients used to make toilet paper – paper fiber and water – are in strong supply. Production is being ramped up at American factories operating 24/7. And experts expect a more abundant stock soon on store shelves.

“I can’t give you an exact number, but I will tell you we’re making more than ever,” said Arist Mastorides, president of family care for Kimberly-Clark North America, maker of Cottonelle toilet paper and other paper products. “It’s a significant amount to cover what we think will be used with people traveling less and staying home more.”

That’s part of the problem right now – not just hoarding and not because people are going to the bathroom more than normal. It’s also because so many consumers are going to the bathroom in different locations from before the pandemic – at home instead of workplaces, which often use a different kind of toilet paper than used at home.

What's the difference between toilet paper at home and at work?

One kind of bath tissue – for the commercial market – often is made of one ply of recycled fiber and generally is found on rollers at businesses and public places. The other kind – retail toilet paper – is often made of two-ply virgin fiber and is generally much softer for use at home.

This location shift prompted by shelter-at-home rules would lead to an estimated 40% increase over the average daily home usage, according to Georgia-Pacific, which makes Quilted Northern toilet paper and other paper products.

The demand has “increased on retail, and it’s staying steady or surged in the commercial market” because of use at busy health care facilities and other essential businesses, said Eric Abercrombie, spokesman for Georgia-Pacific, based in Atlanta. Abercrombie said the company still expects commercial-market toilet paper demand to decline as “business and vacation plans change.”

Meanwhile, retail toilet paper demand swelled to unforeseen heights in March, with \$1.45 billion in toilet paper sales in the four-week period ending March 29, up 112% from a year earlier, according to IRI, a Chicago-based market research firm. Retail stores couldn’t keep enough supply on the shelves, and the supply chain became strained by the demand.

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The supply chain for toilet paper “is not built for dramatic shifts and seasonal demand changes,” said Scott Luton, the CEO and founder of Supply Chain Now, a digital media company. “It’s not like pumpkins during the fall and chicken wings during the Super Bowl.”

Luton also notes that repurposing commercial-market toilet paper to retail shelves “is not simple to do,” even with stocks of it sitting untouched in storage rooms of closed businesses.

When will toilet paper get to stores?

Getting more product to market is another matter. Georgia-Pacific, for example, has 14 facilities in 11 states making toilet paper. Before it gets to retail store shelves, those packages might first go to a regional distribution center by truck.

“We are working hard to maximize the number of deliveries we can load and ship out of our facilities – you can just load and unload so fast,” Abercrombie wrote in an e-mail. In the last week of March, “our mills and regional distribution centers managed to ship out 120% of normal capacity. We also are working with customers to have direct shipments when possible to reduce distribution time. We currently don’t have any issues with carrier capacity (trucks and trailers) to ship.”

Normally, this is a well-timed process based on consistent demand for a product that does not take long to make in factories. For Kimberly-Clark, the fiber generally comes from trees in North or Latin America and then is transported to American factories in big white sheets. The material then gets dumped into bins with water, where it’s blended and formed into massive rolls to be cut into logs and then smaller individual rolls.

“The whole process happens very, very fast,” said Mastorides, who declined to say exactly how long because of competitive reasons.

The process also is highly automated.

“So when there is a surge in demand, which we have never seen before, the toilet paper manufacturers cannot keep up,” said Patrick Penfield, professor of supply chain practice at Syracuse. “They would love to be able to supply all the demand, but they would need to expand capacity by buying more equipment. It’s very expensive. So really all they can do to minimally increase their capacity is using overtime or maybe adding another shift if they can.”

The biggest toilet paper makers in the U.S. say their factories are working around the clock to produce record amounts, including Procter & Gamble, which makes Charmin and other paper products. All have the added challenge of keeping their workers healthy during the coronavirus outbreak.

“We are prioritizing our bestselling sizes to maximize the amount of product we can ship to retailers,” said Loren Fanroy, a spokesperson for Procter & Gamble.

Mastorides of Kimberly-Clark also said it is increasing production by minimizing the different kinds of packages it normally makes, such as four-packs, eight-packs and 24-packs. Some ship directly to retailers, others to distribution centers where they are mixed with other Kimberly-Clark products.

“Our limited assortment is enabling us to get that product through and into our distribution centers faster, and as we work with our retail partners to get that limited assortment, they’re able to build trucks faster,” Mastorides said.

What about paper towels?

Paper towels are manufactured in much the same way as toilet paper and by the same companies. But it is not flying off the shelves like toilet paper for a variety of reasons, even if cleaning supplies are at a premium during the pandemic. One reason is that reusable cotton towels often are used instead. Another is that the fear of running out of an essential First World product – toilet paper – spreads through social media and other channels.

“We’ve known for a long time it’s essential for a better life,” Mastorides said. “It’s something they’ve chosen to stock up on.”

Retail customers soon are expected to get more relief as manufacturers increase production, home bathrooms run out of room for stockpiles and at least some commercial-market product is repurposed to meet retail demand.

“It’s really just trying to get that supply chain caught up,” said Abercrombie of Georgia-Pacific. “We took care of the demand we could in terms of existing inventory. We tried to increase operations where we could, and then also trying to smartly manage a distribution to get it out.”

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