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At Thanksgiving, plumbers' plates are full

This is the busiest time of the year for plumbers. And it's not all gravy. Sean Cole explains.

TEXT OF STORY

BOB MOON: Thanksgiving is over — for most of us anyway. But have you done all your dishes yet? Might want to think twice before throwing all those leftovers down the drain. Thanksgiving is the busiest time of the year for plumbers. . . . Let me repeat that: Thanksgiving is the busiest time of the year for plumbers. Marketplace's Sean Cole explains why.

SEAN COLE: Well, first of all, it's not because of, you know, uh, how should I put it?\

JOE WOOD: *Excrement's kind of a weird word. Fecal matter is a little clinical. Waste is OK.*

Anyway, it's not because of that. And Joe Wood of Hub Plumbing and Mechanical in Dorchester, Mass., knows that's what you're thinking. Because he says that's what everyone thinks when they hear the word plumber. I drove around with him to a couple of house calls earlier this month.

JOE WOOD: *Alright, this drain's good but the drain underneath is pretty bad. Um, if you wanna step in and take a look . . .*

Drains, Joe says, are a lot more sensitive than people give them credit for. And Thanksgiving after Thanksgiving, America suddenly decides that the garbage disposal is a yard-waste implement.

JOE WOOD: *People think the garbage disposals are wood chippers and they overfeed 'em. Drains clogged. You wind up cutting out sections of drains just to get through to what has gone wrong.*

In short, think of how you feel after the typical Thanksgiving dinner. Now think of your plumbing trying to digest 10 times as much turkey, bones included, potato peels, stuffing . . .

JOHN WOOD: *Stuffing's a real treat. If you take a whole pan of cold stuffing and dump that down there, it's not really gonna go anywhere too fast.*

This is John Wood, Joe's boss and also his brother. He says the day after Thanksgiving is usually even worse than the holiday itself.

JOHN WOOD: *Because everyone will ignore everything and leave the pans sitting in the sink until the next day. And that's when the fun really begins.*

And by fun, of course, John Wood means a total lack thereof. He says he once had to chop 8 or 9 feet of pipe out of a customer's wall because the drain was so packed with food.

JOHN WOOD: *And what's really nice is the mix of smells and colors and tastes as your pulling it out. So, you can get, oh, I don't know, Ajax mixed with turkey and then a little bit*

of Drano to stir that up. Then some pumpkin pie mashed in. So I don't know if Calvin Klein comes out with a smell called *The Day After Thanksgiving*, but that's what it would be. It's pretty rotten.

And it gets rottener. John Wood says he's been on at least one call where the sink was backed up in the first floor of an apartment building but not on floors seven, six, five, four, three and two. So all of that water hit the first floor clog and . . . Well, you can see where this is going.

JOHN WOOD: *It looks like "The Amityville Horror" or "The Exorcist" or something where the sink is just blasting black water and chunks of food and everything else out over the floor. And you know the customer's going "No! Stop! No!"*

He says this is why he tends to have Thanksgiving dinner in Chinatown. Little moo shoo pork. No mess.

CHARLES APPLEBY: *All right. I wanna start this meeting. Welcome everybody.*

The big trade group that represents plumbers is called the Plumbing Heating Cooling Contractors Association. The Connecticut chapter let me sit in on their board meeting. I asked every plumber present to sum up Thanksgiving in one word vis a vis their profession. Bob Macca of Macca Plumbing in Hartford followed the directions nicely.

BOB MACCA: *Panic.*

The others didn't quite get the "one word" part.

PLUMBER 2: *An interrupted dinner.*

PLUMBER 3: *In-laws and the heat doesn't work.*

PLUMBER 4: *Family and friends over to the house when the septic system backs up. Including the kitchen sink disposal.*

With all this heck about to break loose, some plumbers make sure to have extra clog-breaking and flood-sucking equipment on their truck. But other than that, Bob Macca says other there's not a lot they can do to prepare.

BOB MACCA: *You know, being in a licensed profession, you can't just ramp up and say, "OK, now I'm gonna hire four more people for the holidays." You know, in retail they have that luxury to do that, but we can't do that because our men need to be licensed and trained and so forth.*

On the positive side, both Macca and John Wood of Hub Plumbing say there's a lot of cash in performing gastric bypass surgery on so many drain systems. Not to mention all the other problems. I mean, really, John Wood refused to mention them.

JOHN WOOD: *We're on radio here, so I don't want to get too descriptive in my stories. I could tell you lots of stories.*

COLE: *I can just bleep stuff out, you know.*

WOOD: *You can bleep stuff out? Oh. Well, I really don't want to disgust your listener base.*

COLE: *They're listening to a business show. They're disgusted already.*

WOOD: *Yeah. Right. Exactly. Who wants to spend their time doing that? Yeah, I mean, that's just . . . gross.*

In Boston, I'm Sean Cole for Marketplace.