

# Toilet Paper Derangement Syndrome: It's Here and It's Real

I was at the dentist's office last week for a checkup when Dr. H came in wearing his usual colorful smock. He poked around in my mouth, and then said to his assistant, "Number 15 is going to have to come out."

"Number 15?" I asked.

"The molar at the back on the top left. It's been broken off for a while now. Best to extract it."

"Okay," I said. "Do I get to keep the tooth?"

"No, we have to throw it away." He gave me a puzzled look. "What would you do with a tooth?"

"I'd take it home, stick it under my pillow, summon up the Tooth Fairy, and ask for a pallet of toilet paper for my neighbors and me."

He laughed and went on his way.

Food, water, liquor, gas, and cigarettes: in post-apocalyptic fiction, these are the items panicked mobs snatch from the shelves of grocery stores.

But toilet paper?

As I write these words, in my mind's eye I see some middle-aged man sitting in a chair in his living room, staring at 200 rolls of the white stuff stacked against the wall, rubbing his hands together like a miser in love with his gold and cackling all the while, a la Gollum in [\*The Lord of the Rings\*](#), "Ah, my precious, my precious."

With Americans obsessed right now about the supply of TP, I decided to hit the Internet and conduct an investigation. Here are some results.

First invented and used long ago by wealthy Chinese, toilet paper as we know and love it is a product of the nineteenth century. In 1857, Joseph C. Gayetty created the first commercially packaged toilet paper, flat sheets which he called "The Therapeutic Paper," and with aloe added to it, "Gayetty's Medicated Paper." Other manufacturers followed in his stead, making such advances as removing splinters from the paper and wrapping it in rolls around a cardboard tube. This last innovation still rouses household debates over whether the roll should open away from or toward the wall. At any rate, here we are today, frightened out of our wits that we may run out of this valuable commodity.

We've suffered TPDS (Toilet Paper Derangement Syndrome) on at least one other occasion. In 1973, popular "Tonight Show" host Johnny Carson made [a joke](#) about "an acute shortage of...of toilet paper." The country had recently experienced gas shortages, and Carson's comment sent shoppers racing to the stores. Though no shortage then existed, for a brief time toilet paper became as rare as a snowfall in Florida in July.

Filmmaker [Brian Gersten](#) is making a short animated documentary about the Carson toilet paper incident. "It's a great case study about misinformation in the media," Gersten told Paley Matters. "It goes beyond the base level of this bizarre event. There are lessons throughout about how we consume media."

Hmmm. Sounds familiar.

So are we running out of toilet paper?

Yes and no.

Yes, because of panic buying in our stores. In "[Will America Run Out of Toilet Paper?](#)" Gillian Friedman interviews Paul

Sheard, senior fellow at the Harvard Kennedy Center, who observed that fear and not shortage is the cause for the present dearth of toilet paper in our stores. “It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If people are concerned the shelves will become empty, they will become empty.”

No, toilet paper will not disappear. The great bulk of what is now white gold is produced here in the United States rather than overseas, and factories are working overtime to produce more of it. Kate Gibson of CBS News [reports](#) that unlike hand sanitizer and face masks, toilet paper is in plentiful supply and that getting it out of the warehouses to stores is a larger problem than ramping-up manufacturing.

So maybe you’re wondering “what to do if you run out of toilet paper?” Google that question, and you won’t find yourself alone. There are 776,000,000 results and counting, and lots of sites to check out. I’m going to skip any details here, but if you’ve become a victim of the “Toilet Paper Apocalypse,” scout around and find a method that works for you. (For the literal-minded among my readers: The guy who advocates substituting kale for TP is kidding.)

If the shortage does continue, however, I have a plan for getting hold of that extracted tooth. I’ll buy some Charmin on the black market and make Dr. H an offer: eight rolls of the white stuff for a tooth.

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