

SHOPPING

Don't count on finding toilet paper on your next run to Target or Walmart: COVID-19 panic buying is on a roll again

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Don't count on finding toilet paper on your next run to Target or Walmart.

Paper products and other household staples are in high demand in stores and online again as the virus surges and lockdowns loom, but none more so than those essential rolls of soft cotton squares.

Photos of bare shelves and public pleas to leave behind a few rolls for other shoppers are overflowing social media.

"The toilet paper aisle is CLEARED!" one person wrote on Twitter. "March 2.0 is here folkssss."

"I'm a grocery store manager. Today I saw carts overflowing, stacked with toilet paper on top," posted another. "For the love of God, please, stop. Right now."

Who's open on Thanksgiving? Walmart, Target, Best Buy are closed Thanksgiving amid COVID-19, while CVS and Walgreens are open. See the list.

Target's Black Friday sale: Target releases Black Friday ad with deals on electronics, toys, more starting Sunday. What's different amid COVID?

In another unpleasant flashback to the pandemic's early days of panic buying and hoarding, some stores have reinstated purchase limits on hard-to-get items.

"It really does have everything to do with what's happening with COVID cases in any particular community," Walmart's chief executive officer Doug McMillon said on a recent quarterly earnings call. "We're going to be able to respond in this instance better than we did in the first half of the year, although we're still – as a total supply chain – stressed in some places."

Walmart U.S. CEO John Furner says toilet paper and cleaning supplies are seeing "the most strain."

Target told USA TODAY that it is coordinating with stores, distribution centers and suppliers to make sure that essential items such as baby products, food and over-the-counter medicine are "fast-tracked through the supply chain and prioritized for restocking."

It has also placed purchase limits when necessary on some key products such as toilet paper, disinfectant wipes, multipurpose spray cleaner and gloves and more.

Slow your roll: Grocers restore purchase limits on toilet paper, other products

"We'll adjust limits as needed, and respectfully ask all guests to consider their immediate needs and purchase accordingly, so more families can find the products they need," Target said in a statement.

The new burst of stockpiling is hitting eight months after the first, as the U.S. is setting records for new cases and some states are enforcing new restrictions to get the surge in infections under control. But this time manufacturers have had a chance to prepare, with new measures in place to respond to sudden spikes in demand, supply chain experts say.

“There is no doubt the industry is a lot smarter today than it was at the beginning of the pandemic, and companies have adjusted their businesses to meet eight straight months of double-digit demand – which we expect to continue,” Geoff Freeman, president and CEO of the Consumer Brands Association, told USA TODAY in an email.

“Fear of shortages are often a self-fulfilling prophecy, which is why you see our retail partners back to limiting numbers on the most-purchased products,” Freeman said. Are there some blips on the radar that could impact supply? Yes. But the fact remains we’re in a much better place than where we were in March.”

Can’t find toilet paper?: Here’s where it’s still in stock right now

Still, shortages are a possibility if COVID-19 outbreaks “adversely affect the labor supply chain,” says Anna Nagurney, the John F. Smith Memorial professor of operations management at the Isenberg School of Management at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

“Plus, winter weather can bring additional supply chain disruptions in terms of transportation,” she added.

Slightly more than half of Americans in a recent poll said they already have or plan to stockpile food and other essentials. And that pattern will only intensify as the number of virus cases increase and the holidays approach, Nagurney said.

“Such purchases provide some measure of control and security, in a sense, to household members,” she said.

A measure of how urgent some people consider the situation can be seen in Monday’s headline in the Tri-City Herald in Kennewick, Washington: “More than 100 rolls of toilet paper found in accused thief’s car, Washington police say.” The Walla Walla Sheriff’s Office dubbed it the “Great Toilet Paper Caper of 2020.”

The National Park Service recommended that people opt for alternatives they can find in their yards, such as pinecones.

“With the toilet paper supply running low, deciding on the best pine cone became a bear necessity,” officials joked. “Don’t worry. It’ll be pine.”