

# Complaint Box | Sidewalk Gum

BY SUE PLASTRIK DECEMBER 19, 2011 9:34 AM December 19, 2011 9:34 am  
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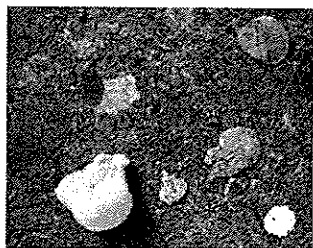


Illustration: The New York Times

I had seen the blobs before — but it wasn't until I lost my hearing aid that I had an in-your-face encounter with them. While searching for the device, I retraced my steps — same elevator, same route, focusing like a mine sweeper, gazing left to right, right to left — but my view was blocked by chewed-up pieces of gum in varying stages of decay, from light-colored, freshly spat out, to deeply embedded, flat and black.

Who would do this? When I was a child we were taught to save the gum wrapper to enclose the sticky remains. These days, I see conscientious building porters on their hands and knees scraping away all the unsightly blobs, only to have the newly pristine surface become a target again for the spitters. (Do they get points for distance covered?)

When I looked up “gum removal” on the Internet I found an entire industry. Not only do companies sell equipment to remove the residue, some send out cleaning teams to deal with it.

“Cleaning up gum is a sticky business. . .” reads the home page of GumBusters of NY. And not just because of the substance itself. There is an ecological issue involved as well: harsh chemicals using a lot of water, versus high-pressure steam methods using much less water.

My research informed me that gum blobs are a worldwide urban issue — some cities have fined merchants, whose property is in effect vandalized, if there is not prompt removal. It is also a health issue, especially now, as we enter flu season.

“Wash your hands,” “Sneeze into your sleeve,” “Cover your mouth when you cough” are familiar mantras. How about adding a few words to the “No Spitting” admonition that still shows up in some subways. Something like: “And that includes the wad in your mouth!”

*Sue Plastrik, a retired registered nurse and career volunteer, lives on the Upper East Side*