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## Flushing out viral analysis

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Poo'd have thought it? Sewage is being hailed by scientists as a tool to uncover hidden coronavirus infections and as an early warning system for new outbreaks.

The WA Water Corporation has collected 26 samples across five metropolitan wastewater treatment plants in the Perth area in readiness for the State's involvement in a national research project.

The Health Department said the samples started to be collected last month as "a pre-emptive measure".

The project will assess the efficacy of effluent as a surveillance tool to monitor the virus.

Professor Peter Collignon, an infectious diseases physician and microbiologist at the Canberra Hospital, is already sold on the plan.

"Sewage testing actually means you're sampling a whole community rather than just 100 individuals or 1000 individuals," he said. Sewage is already

used to monitor illegal drug use across the State and country.

Researchers from The University of Queensland and the CSIRO are developing the test, which finds genetic traces of the illness in raw sewage.

The aim is to identify specific areas where COVID-19 is present, as well as the approximate number of infections.

Professor Collignon said: "I think sewage testing is so important because people who are asymptomatic (and don't know they're infected) seem to have similar viral loads."

He said it would pick up outbreaks in situations where people had no reason to believe they were infected.

Professor Collignon said sewage surveillance had provided early warnings of outbreaks in France, Spain and the Netherlands.

Research published by the journal Nature Medicine in April found people shed or excreted COVID-19 viral material two to three days before getting symptoms.