

Proper Disposal of Unused Medication

Unused and/or unwanted medications are showing up as pollution in wastewater. Proper disposal methods of medications is necessary to prevent this pollution from entering our waterways.

According to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's Web site (www.pca.state.mn.us) under the Living Green, Citizens, Household Hazardous Waste page:

“Pharmaceutical waste: Disposing of unwanted medications. Expired or unwanted prescription or over-the-counter medications from households have traditionally been disposed of by flushing them down the toilet or a drain. Although this method of disposal prevents immediate accidental ingestion, it can cause pollution in wastewater; which has been demonstrated to cause adverse effects to fish and other aquatic wildlife. When the water is eventually reused, it can also cause unintentional human exposure to chemicals in medications. Again, **DO NOT FLUSH.**”

In addition to the environmental impacts, prescription drugs in home cabinets are highly susceptible to diversion, misuse, and abuse. Rates of prescription drug abuse in the U.S. are alarmingly high—more Americans currently abuse prescription drugs than the number of those using cocaine, hallucinogens, and heroin combined, according to the 2009 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. Studies show that people who abuse prescription drugs often obtained them from family and friends, including from the home medicine cabinet. Medications are also a significant cause of accidental poisoning and death, as reported by the Poison Control Center.”

The Web page goes on to explain how to dispose of medications and how to manage other types of pharmaceutical waste at home.

“Disposing of medications at home. Your unwanted medications may be disposed of in your trash. Follow these precautions to prevent accidental or intentional ingestion.

1. Keep the medication in its original container. The labels may contain safety information and the caps are typically childproof. Leaving the content information clearly visible, cover the patient's name with permanent marker:

2. Modify the contents to discourage consumption.

•Solid medications: add a small amount of vinegar to pills or capsules to at least partially dissolve them.



•Liquid medications: add enough table salt, flour, or nontoxic powdered spice, such as mustard to make a pungent, unsightly mixture that discourages anyone from eating it.

•Blister packs: wrap packages containing pills in opaque tape like duct tape.

3. Seal and conceal. Tape the medication container lid shut with packing or duct tape and put it inside a non-transparent bag or container such as an empty yogurt or margarine tub to ensure that the contents cannot be seen. Do not conceal medicines in food products because they could be inadvertently consumed by wildlife scavengers.

4. Discard the container in your garbage can—do not place in the recycling bin.

Managing other types of pharmaceutical waste. Unused ampoules, vials, and IV bags should not be opened. Wrap the container with tape to minimize breakage, then place in an opaque plastic container (such as an empty yogurt or margarine tub). Wrap the outside of the container or bag with additional duct or shipping tape to prevent leakage and further obscure the contents. Dispose of the container in the trash.

Chemotherapy drugs may require special handling. Work with your healthcare provider on proper disposal options for this type of medication.”

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