

Household Pharmaceutical Waste Disposal

This fact sheet provides guidelines on disposal of waste pharmaceuticals generated at home, including out-of-date and other leftover medications.

Background

When used as intended, pharmaceuticals applied externally or ingested have the potential to be excreted or washed into sewage systems. In addition, unused pharmaceuticals are often directly flushed to sewage systems. Wastewater treatment plants and septic systems usually do not treat or only partially treat pharmaceuticals, so chemical compounds from pharmaceuticals pass through treatment plants or septic systems to our rivers or groundwater.

Environmental Concerns

Recent research shows that pharmaceutical compounds exist in our environment both as a result of improper disposal of unused pharmaceuticals and because they are excreted by the person using the medication.

Recommendations

- Do not dispose of waste pharmaceuticals, including chemotherapeutic wastes, in garbage that is intended for a permitted solid waste landfill or incinerator.
- Do not dispose of pharmaceuticals down a drain or toilet.
- Do not burn household waste containing pharmaceuticals.
- Place needles, syringes, lancets, and other sharp objects in a hard plastic or metal container with a tightly secured lid.
- Before discarding the container, make sure to reinforce the lid with heavy-duty tape.
- Do not use clear plastic or glass containers.
- Soiled bandages, disposable sheets, and medical gloves should be placed in securely fashioned plastic bags before you put them in the garbage can with the other trash.
- Never pour chemotherapy medications down the drain or onto the ground. These medications can be toxic to wildlife and to the bacteria needed to maintain your septic system. Instead, ask your physician about a way to dispose of these medications that is environmentally safe.

Federal Guidelines

The Federal Government released new guidelines for proper disposal in early 2007. These guidelines, released jointly by The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), urge Americans to take these steps:

- Take unused, unneeded, or expired prescription drugs out of their original containers and throw them in the trash.
- Mixing prescription drugs with an undesirable substance, such as used coffee grounds or kitty litter, and putting them in impermeable, non-descript containers, such as empty cans or sealable bags; will further ensure the drugs are not diverted.
- Take advantage of community pharmaceutical take-back programs that allow the public to bring unused drugs to a central location for proper disposal. Some communities have pharmaceutical take-back programs or community solid waste programs that allow the public to bring unused drugs to a central location for proper disposal. Where these exist, they are a good way to dispose of unused pharmaceuticals.

For more information, please visit: www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov

More questions regarding disposal? Contact your local Pharmacy