



Frequently asked questions about Disposing of Outdated Medications

From the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

The issue of proper pharmaceutical drug disposal is an emerging concern for the environment. Household medications include over-the-counter drugs and prescription medications. These are often discarded because they are out of date, unusable, or unwanted. If medications are flushed down a toilet, they may go to one of two places – a septic tank or through a series of sanitary sewers into a wastewater treatment plant. This becomes a problem because sewage treatment plants are not designed to remove pharmaceuticals and many drugs may not be completely eliminated before treated water enters our waterways. Although the long-term effects to humans are unknown, some drugs have been shown to have negative effects on aquatic life. There is also the concern of the promotion of bacteria and virus resistance to antibiotics due to continual exposure to antibiotics in drinking water.

Disposing of medications in your septic system can also be harmful as it can disrupt the natural bacteria that keep the system running smoothly. Most medications can be disposed of without presenting a substantial threat to the environment with the exception of cancer treating drugs. Cancer treating drugs should be brought to a hospital for proper disposal because they are harmful and poisonous.

Tips for Proper Disposal:

1. Drugs should be kept in the original container with a childproof lids attached.
2. If patient's names are present they should be removed.
3. Care should be taken with liquids, especially if they are in glass bottles, because of the potential to break.
4. Try and make the drugs as unappetizing as possible. Add water to pills and then add a nontoxic spice such as cayenne pepper. Adding saw dust or kitty litter to liquids will absorb the liquid and discourage anyone from eating it.
5. Drugs should then be wrapped in absorbent material (i.e. paper towels) and placed into a sealed plastic bag. The drugs can also be placed into a box or brown bag to conceal the contents. Place in the trash as close to garbage pick up date as possible.

You can also check with your local pharmacy to see if they have any disposal programs for customers.

Remember - Never give unused prescription medication to someone else; it may be harmful to the other person. You could also be charged with dispensing medicine without a license.