



safe prescription drug disposal

Get Rid of Unused Prescription Drugs Without Contaminating Your Drinking Water

A group representing the nation's counties wants drug companies to take back unused or expired prescription drugs.

By Emily Main

what you can do:

Dispose of your expired medications properly, until laws are in place that require someone else to do it.

RODALE NEWS, EMMAUS, PA—Getting Big Pharma to take back unused or expired prescription drugs could protect fish and wildlife and keep our drinking water safe, says the National Association of Counties (NACo), an organization that represents U.S. county governments. The group recently adopted a resolution pushing for laws that could force drug companies to accept and dispose of unwanted medicines. They hope such legislation will encourage drug makers to design medications that degrade rapidly and harmlessly when released into the environment.

THE DETAILS: Pharmaceutical contamination of water supplies is a nationwide phenomenon. The U.S. Geological Survey found pharmaceuticals and chemicals from personal-care products in every stream it sampled in a 2003 water-quality test, and a Baylor University study published in March 2009 found medications building up in fish, including over-the-counter antihistamines, antidepressants, and medicines that treat blood pressure, epilepsy, and bipolar disorder. While a large majority of these medications come from people eliminating them from their bodies, many of us add to that burden by flushing unused medications down the toilet or pouring them down the drain. Because wastewater treatment plants are designed to remove biological contaminants more so than chemical contaminants, the chemicals in pharmaceuticals make it back into waterways and even drinking water. An Associated Press report published in 2008 found that at least 46 million Americans drink tap water contaminated with everything from antibiotics to birth-control hormones.

The resolution unanimously adopted by NACo supports legislation that would require pharmaceutical companies to take back their medications, similar to the legislation adopted in many states to get electronics manufacturers to take back and recycle their products. The concept is called "extended producer responsibility," says Bill Sheehan, director of the [Product Policy Institute](#), which helped NACo draft its proposal. It's meant to take the financial burden off local governments and pharmacies, which currently run the few drug take-back programs that currently exist in the U.S. And, he says, it forces drug companies to put more thought into the environmental impacts of their products.

The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA) released a statement in response to the proposal, saying “there is little, if any, evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of drug take-back programs. In addition to their failure to sufficiently respond to the need for community education on prescription drug abuse, take-back programs do not make environmental sense when the fastest, easiest way to rid the home of unused medicines is to dispose of them in household trash.” Having drug companies handle the take-back is more efficient and it won’t add much to the costs of medications, counters Sheehan. He cites a Canadian take-back program operated by a pharmaceutical manufacturer that cost all of \$315,000 for an entire year. “For drug companies, the cost is trivial,” he says. In most areas, the task is currently handled by local governments or pharmacies, which can be time consuming and expensive, adds Sharon Corbitt, director of external communications for the American Pharmacists Association (APA). “Pharmacies have to categorize what they’re taking back, have to sort pills according to class and type of drug,” she says. She also adds that pharmacies can’t take back controlled substances unless law enforcement is involved, which adds to the cost. The Drug Enforcement Agency has strict controls over certain medications to prevent old or unused drugs from getting into the hands of drug dealers or kids. “Pharmacies can’t just collect these things and throw them away themselves,” she adds.

WHAT IT MEANS: With the pharmaceutical industry likely to resist the idea for as long as it can, for now we’ll all have to dispose of our own meds responsibly. Unless there’s a take-back program in your area, that means putting them in the trash, rather than flushing them or pouring them down the drain. It’s the only way most of us can responsibly dispose of unused or expired medications. To help, PhRMA has partnered with the APA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to establish the SMARxT Disposal program, an educational campaign designed to educate consumers about responsible drug disposal.

Here are their tips for getting rid of drugs so they won’t end up in your next fish fillet or your tap water:

- Check to see if you can return the medication to the drug manufacturer. Some medications, such as Accutane and certain potent painkillers, have return policies built into their cost because of risk management, says Corbitt.
- Pour liquid medications into a sealable plastic bag. If the medication is a solid (a pill or liquid capsule, for example), crush it or add water to dissolve it. Then bag it.
- Add kitty litter, sawdust, coffee grounds (or any material that mixes with the medication and makes it less appealing for pets and children to eat) to the plastic bag.
- Seal the plastic bag and put it in the trash.
- Remove and destroy ALL identifying personal information (prescription label) from all medication containers before throwing them away or recycling them (check the number on the bottom to see if it’s a plastic type that your curbside recycling program accepts).

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