

# Disposing of Unused Medications

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A friend of mine, visiting the United States to be with her father for his last moments, called me after he had passed away. While tying up loose ends, she reported how appalled she was to discover that the private nurse, who had been looking after her father, had flushed all the remaining medications down the toilet, telling her that they had to be disposed of. It was as though flushing things down the toilet made them disappear forever.

According to the Health Canada web page entitled “It’s Your Health: Proper Use and Disposal of Medication,” there is growing evidence that prescription and over-the-counter medications, supplements, personal care products and even veterinary drugs may have a harmful effect on the environment if disposed of improperly. Even though the concentration levels of these products may be very low, it can be enough to cause adverse effects in the environment. There are also concerns over the effects of medications ending up in drinking water sources.

Some drugs flushed down the toilet or the sink enter our water systems and pass through sewage treatment facilities without being removed or neutralized. The systems are simply not designed to filter them out. Just as the phosphates in dishwasher detergent have been shown to affect the health of our lakes, many other components of the things we consume or use can build up in our lakes and rivers, or in our landfill sites when they are simply thrown out with the trash.

Consider the effects on fish and animals that receive their sustenance from the water that has been discharged from our sewage treatment plants. Antibiotics and hormones can be absorbed by the creatures at the bottom of the food chain and accumulate in greater amounts as they move through it. Minute amounts of hormones have been shown to affect fish, creating reproductive difficulties in some types and more serious gender disruptions in others. There is also concern that leftover antibiotics being disposed of in the environment may be adding to the viability of antibiotic resistant strains that make it more difficult to fight bacterial infections in humans and animals.

The website of NAPRA, the National Association of Pharmacy Regulatory Authorities, lists the standards of practice that pharmacies adhere to and describes some of the programs created by pharmaceutical associations across the country aimed at educating the population about the need to dispose of their surplus and expired drugs in an environmentally conscious way. Some smaller regional groups have created their own “Medicine Cabinet Clean Up Campaigns” that circulate pamphlets, publish data, or provide sample letters to patients providing the information needed to act responsibly in this matter.

If you have old or expired medications, take them to your pharmacy. I checked with three of the drug stores in Ste. Agathe and they all confirmed to me that they take back medications, which are then collected by a firm specialized in disposing of this kind of waste. If you have questions, talk to your local pharmacist. Your concern will be taken very seriously.

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