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EcoConsumer

The environmental side effects of old medicine

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

How many bottles or vials of medication do you have in your home?

Most of us have dozens, if not hundreds, when you count all the prescription and over-the-counter drugs in our medicine cabinets and drawers. Many never get used up, and eventually they need to go — somewhere.

But because improper disposal of old drugs can harm the environment and pose a safety risk, governments and medical organizations have begun to address this issue.

First let's consider a related question: Do you need to throw away drugs when the expiration date has passed? Not necessarily. The date stamped on the drug container (a federal requirement) means the manufacturer vouches for the full potency and safety of the drug until that time.

This is based on testing by the manufacturer. So, if a drug has an expiration date two years from when you bought it, that may mean, in part, that the drug company did expiration-date testing for only two years.

Differing views on this issue exist within the medical community. But according to the Harvard University Medical School Family Health Guide Web site, "The expiration date doesn't really indicate a point at which the medication is no longer effective or has become unsafe to use. Medical authorities state expired drugs are safe to take, even those that expired years ago."



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Exceptions include tetracycline, nitroglycerin, insulin and liquid antibiotics. If your life depends on a drug, of course, don't take chances with its effectiveness. Check with your pharmacist about drug potency or safety. Storage conditions also affect medications. Swedish Medical Center advises storing drugs in dry, cool, dark areas.

Resources

For more information on how to dispose of drugs:

- **Northwest Product Stewardship Council:** Medicine Take-Back Program locations, www.medicinereturn.com

- **King County Wastewater Treatment Division:** www.dnr.metrokc.gov/WTD/community/oldstuff.htm

- **SMARxT DISPOSAL project:** www.fws.gov/southeast

- **Harvard Family Health Guide:** www.health.harvard.edu/fhg/updates/update1103a.shtml

- **Swedish Medical Center:** www.swedish.org/16822.cfm

Don't flush

When you do need to dispose of drugs, the standard advice used to be to flush them down the toilet. Not anymore. Research has shown that chemicals in drugs end up in waterways.

In March, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and American Pharmacists Association launched a public education campaign called "SMARxT DISPOSAL." This program and King County Wastewater Treatment Division both strongly recommend against flushing drugs.

Even the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy recently proclaimed that prescription drugs should not be flushed unless "the accompanying patient information specifically instructs it is safe to do so."

Where to take them

Instead, take advantage of drug take-back programs when available. Selected Group Health pharmacies in Western Washington now accept unwanted drugs, and one area drug-store chain plans to begin this service soon. These programs collect drugs in a secure container and send them to a high-temperature incinerator (a disposal method recommended by

the World Health Organization).

Tell your pharmacy you would like it to work with drug manufacturers to offer this take-back service. In British Columbia, it's standard practice, with more than 90 percent of pharmacies participating. Drug companies provide full funding for the B.C. program.

Proper disposal

If you cannot use a take-back program, put old medications in the garbage. Follow these guidelines to make sure children, pets or others don't get into them:

- Crush pills or capsules, or dissolve them in a small amount of water.
- Mix liquid medications with an absorbent material such as kitty litter or sawdust.
- Place the old drugs in a sealed plastic bag, and conceal that bag in a second plastic bag.
- Dispose of the prescription label separately from the drugs, and cross out personal information.

Of course, it's best to have fewer leftover drugs in the first place. If you're trying a new over-the-counter medication such as a headache reliever, buy the smallest amount possible, even if a larger size is on sale. For a prescription drug, don't hesitate to ask your doctor or pharmacist whether different quantities and potencies are available — you can often save money and reduce waste if they can tailor the prescription to your needs.

The EcoConsumer column aims to help readers balance consuming and conserving. Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at tom.watson@metrokc.gov or 206-296-4481. Watch for more EcoConsumer resources from King County at www.KCecoconsumer.com.

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