

## What should we do with unwanted medications?

Have you ever noticed how the contents of your medicine cabinet seem to grow over time? The really old stuff seems to eventually find its way into the shadowy recesses of the cabinet under the bathroom sink. The expiration dates become obscured. You think to yourself, “I should probably throw this stuff away, but I might need it one day!” Well, we all know that ingesting old or expired medications is probably a really bad idea. Eventually, you are going to want to get rid of this stuff. So, what is the proper way to get rid of unwanted medications?

You may have heard – pharmaceutical medications are showing up in surface water across the country. The simple truth is these chemicals are not removed by traditional sewage treatment plants. Of particular concern are endocrine disrupting chemicals that are present in some medications (like birth control pills). These chemicals can also be found in some industrial effluent and in runoff from the application of certain pesticides. In many studies worldwide, these chemicals, present in streams in higher concentrations downstream of municipal wastewater treatment plants, have been shown to actually alter the ratio of fish genders (favoring more female fish) and cause male fish to exhibit female characteristics.

Because of these problems, unwanted pharmaceutical medications, *including nearly all over-the-counter drugs* (yes, even aspirin and cold medicine), are considered to be ‘hazardous’ under Washington state rules! At this time, San Juan County cannot accept medications at the annual ‘Round-Up’ collection events. Businesses (medical clinics and pharmacies) are required to properly handle and dispose of these drugs. As individuals, we can also help to reduce our contribution by properly disposing of unwanted drugs. Here are the current recommendations in San Juan County:

1. **DO NOT:** Flush medications down the toilet or into the sink. Flushing drugs adds to pollution in our waters because our wastewater treatment plants and septic systems DO NOT treat these chemicals.
2. **DO:** Use community take-back programs for proper disposal of prescription and over-the-counter medications. This is the preferred disposal method because it ensures that the drugs are disposed of properly and prevents these materials from getting into the environment. Unfortunately, there is currently no program operating in San Juan County. On the mainland, many Bartell Drugs and Group Health locations are set up to take-back all medications, except controlled substances. For locations and more information on drug take-back programs go to [www.medicinereturn.com](http://www.medicinereturn.com).
3. **DO:** Until drug take-back programs are available statewide, mix your medicines with an undesirable substance (such as cat litter or used coffee grounds), put this mixture into a container with a tight-fitting lid, and place into the trash. Make sure your container cannot be accessed by children, pets or other animals, or people who might be looking in garbage for drugs. Putting unwanted medications into the trash is better than flushing, but it is not the best solution to protect people and our environment. Drugs can eventually escape into our environment when landfill liquids are sent to sewage treatment plants.

The bottom line on this issue is the state is working on developing a statewide system to collect and safely dispose of unwanted medicines. Until this is accomplished, *please do not flush medications down the toilet or into the sink*. Whether you are connected to a municipal wastewater treatment system or an on-site septic system, we should all try to keep this stuff out of the environment.

### *Questions?*

Contact Brian Rader, San Juan County Pollution Prevention Specialist, 370-7581, or  
Helen Venada, San Juan County Waste Reduction and Hazardous Waste Coordinator, 370-0503.