

Prescription and Over-the-Counter Medicine Disposal

Most people take medicine (over-the-counter, prescription, or vitamins) at some point in their lives. Occasionally, not all of it is used and it stays in medicine cabinets and drawers until it eventually expires.

An estimated 20%-60% of prescription medications go unused. Improperly disposing of medications by flushing them down the toilet or throwing them in the trash represents an emerging concern for the environment and public health.

Putting unused or expired medication in the trash sends it to landfills where it may seep into the surrounding water table. The pills could also be removed from the trash and used by someone else potentially resulting in illness or death. Flushing unused medications down the toilet sends these chemicals to sewage treatment plants which do not screen for them. That means the chemicals often end up in our lakes, rivers, and streams. A 2002 U.S. Geological Survey analysis found that 80% of the national waterways tested contained low levels of prescription and over-the-counter drugs, steroids, and reproductive hormones.

The correct way of disposing of unused, unwanted, or expired medications is by dropping them in drop boxes at participating local pharmacies and law enforcement agencies. Pharmacies will accept the following items:

- Prescription medications (non-controlled)
- Antibiotics/steroids
- Cold and flu medications
- Vitamins and herbal supplements
- Pet medications
- Medication samples
- Medicated ointments and lotions

NOTE: Prescribed controlled medicines like Codeine, Xanax, Vicodin, OxyContin, and Ritalin must be disposed of in a drop box at a local law enforcement agency.

To properly dispose of medications, leave them in their original containers but block out ALL personal information on the labels. Do not remove the name of the medication.

To find a collection site near you, check online at www.wmtakebackmeds.org for a list of participating pharmacies or ask your pharmacist. Drop boxes are also located at most West Michigan area police and sheriff departments. Certain restrictions may apply at any of the drop off locations. Call the site you plan to use for more information on what is accepted.

Sources: West Michigan Take Back Meds, www.wmtakebackmeds.org; U.S. Geographical Survey, www.usgs.gov