

Dumped drugs turn up in water: Unused drugs should be returned to pharmacy

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Household contaminants are getting into the nation's drinking water at an increasing rate, a new report says.

According to a study released by the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law (CIEL), too many people are flushing unused drugs down the toilet instead of returning them to their pharmacy.

Anne Mitchell, executive director of CIEL, said pharmacists have initiated regional and in-store programs "to capture and properly dispose of these products, ensuring they are not flushed into our water."

But their efforts are too often ignored by customers, she said. Everything from pills and shampoo to household cleaners are getting into the environment, she said.

The report says researchers tested water samples near sewage treatment plants in 14 Canadian cities and in the open waters of the Great Lakes. "Pharmaceutical products such as antibiotics, anti-inflammatories, drugs used to treat high blood pressure and epilepsy and birth control hormones were found in the samples, ranging in concentration from very low to even higher than similar samples in Europe. It is reasonable to assume that pharmaceuticals and other emerging contaminants are widely present in streams, lakes, rivers and ground water in the densely populated regions of the country."

Martin said, "We are now just beginning to learn about the consequences of the contaminants being detected nearly everywhere in surface, ground and drinking water. As more pharmaceuticals and personal care products are used, more contaminants will eventually find their way into our environment, putting us at higher risk of bacteria related illnesses, increasing resistance to antibiotics and hormonal imbalances due to higher concentrations of endocrine-disrupting substances."

She added while many contaminants enter the environment through sink and shower drains, flushing old medications down the toilet is a significant contributor to the problem.

Marnie Garrett, a public health nurse at Lambton Community Health Services Department, said a dozen pharmacies in Sarnia-Lambton have joined a "medication cleanup campaign" aimed at combating the problem.

The pharmacies encourage costumers to bring in old medicines so they can be disposed of properly.

Ron Surman, a pharmacist at Hogan Pharmacy in Bayside Mall, said old drugs brought in by customers are sent off to a hospital incinerator in Toronto for safe disposal. "Incineration isn't cheap, but there can be significant environmental damage if they (old medicines) aren't disposed of properly. We do it as a community service."

Customer co-operation with the program has been good, he said.

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