

New Tricks for Old Drugs

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Before you flush your old medications down the toilet, read this: That's not a method generally recommended as safe -- for people or the environment -- according to new federal guidelines.

The guidelines, issued last month by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, advise consumers to "take unused, unneeded or expired prescription drugs out of their original containers and throw them in the trash."

Even better, they advise, mix the medications with kitty litter or used coffee grounds and put them in "impermeable, nondescript containers, such as empty cans or sealable bags" before tossing them, to help prevent accidental ingestion by children or pets. The Harvard Heart Letter, a publication of Harvard Medical School, offers another tip: Add "some water to pills, and put some flour in liquids" before throwing medications away.

Water Safety Don't flush old medications down the toilet unless the drug's label specifically says to do so. "Drugs can kill helpful bacteria in septic systems and pass largely untouched through sewage treatment plants," according to Harvard. And, "once in landfills, drugs can trickle into groundwater."

If you choose to take part, protect sensitive information, advises Shirley Reitz, associate director of clinical pharmacy services at Group Health Cooperative, a Seattle-based health maintenance organization that runs a medication disposal program. "I would encourage patients . . . not to throw the [medication] container that has their name information on it into a waste container" at a public facility. "They need to cross out their name and other identifying information for their own privacy." Also scratch out your name on medication bottles before disposing of them at home, Harvard advises.

Find Them Read the federal drug disposal guidelines at http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/drugfact/factsht/proper_disposal.html.

-- **January W. Payne**