

Don't flush your drugs

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Fish on Prozac! It may sound ridiculous, but it is happening. Research conducted by the United States Geological Survey (USGS) in 2002 found that 80 percent of the 139 streams in 30 states contained drugs, hormones, steroids, and personal care products. When aquatic organisms are exposed to these substances, there are neurological and physiological effects. For instance, common anti-depressants such as Prozac relax fish. This effect isn't good when it comes to survival in the world of eat or be eaten (or at least hide). In addition, these drugs have been shown to cause developmental problems in fish and delay metamorphosis in frogs.

Since there aren't any underwater pharmacies, how are drugs getting in the water? We put them there by flushing drugs down the toilet. In the past, this was the recommended way to get rid of unwanted medications. However, municipal wastewater treatment plants aren't equipped to filter out most of the pharmaceutical drugs. This means the drugs get released into our water bodies and can be absorbed by aquatic wildlife.

You can help get our aquatic wildlife off drugs. Simply don't flush them down the toilet. This doesn't mean that you will have drugs piled up in your medicine cabinet because there are other ways to dispose of them that doesn't harm water bodies. First, ask your pharmacist if they will take back expired and unused medications. Some pharmacies may be willing to provide this service, but call your pharmacy before taking in any expired and unused medications.

Another disposal method is to throw them in the trash. According to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, these are the steps for proper drug disposal at home:

- Keep the medicines in the original container. This will help identify the contents if they are accidentally ingested.
- Mark out your name and prescription number for safety.
- Put something in with the medicine to make it undesirable
 - For pills: add some water or soda to start dissolving them
 - For liquids: add something inedible like cat litter, dirt or cayenne pepper.
- Close the lid and secure with duct or packing tape.
- Place the bottle(s) inside a non see-through container like a coffee can or plastic laundry bottle.
- Tape that container closed.
- Hide the container in the trash. Do not put in the recycle bin.

Although most pharmaceuticals can be thrown in the trash, there are some HIV drugs and highly addictive drugs, such as oxycodone and morphine sulfate, that should be flushed down the toilet according to their label or accompanying information. When in doubt, consult the materials that come with your prescription to determine the proper way to dispose of these drug types.

It may take some time getting used to throwing drugs in the trash, but once you get into the habit, it will become second nature. (To help remind you how to properly dispose of your pharmaceutical drugs, tape this article on the inside of your medicine cabinet.) All it takes is some stuff found around your home and a couple of minutes. That is a small price to pay for protecting our water.

If you have any questions about how to properly dispose of your medications, please call the University of Florida/IFAS Indian River County Extension Service at (772) 770-5030.