

Don't Drug Your Drinking Water

-Bob Greer
Board Member for the
Watershed Alliance of Adams County (WAAC)
www.adamswatersheds.org

In 1910, Teddy Roosevelt observed that, “Civilized people should be able to dispose of sewage in a better way than putting it in the drinking water.” Here it is, almost a century later, long after we put humans on the moon, and we still send our toilet flushings into our drinking water.

Sewage treatment facilities clean up sewage reasonably well, but they cannot remove most drugs that we flush away. Antibiotics, hormones, tranquilizers, pain medications, all pass through our sewage treatment processes unaltered and go directly into our streams and rivers. We are a drug-taking society, and since there are so many of us, lots of drugs (officially considered “emerging contaminants”) find their way back not only to us, but to all the other creatures which live in or drink these waters.

Recently, members of the Watershed Alliance of Adams County conducted an informal telephone survey of a sample of hospitals and pharmacies, asking for advice about how to dispose of unwanted or outdated prescription medications. A surprising number advised that these drugs should simply be flushed down the toilet. I hope everyone reading this column now will think twice before doing that.

But how should we dispose of unwanted drugs? Just two months ago, the Office of National Drug Control Policy, for the first time, issued a federal guideline on this very subject. Here is how they suggest disposing of unwanted drugs:

First, take advantage of community pharmaceutical take-back programs. Some large cities have a community program of this sort, with drop-off points for unwanted medications, but most places don't, including Adams County. Not only that, the Adams County Environmental Services Recycling Information booklet lists only two pharmacies that will accept outdated medications for disposal – CVS and Wogan's. It's also worth noting that Gettysburg Animal Hospital accepts animal medications for disposal.

Second, if you can't find an outside agency to help you dispose of unwanted medications, here's what you can do at home. Put about a cup of hot water into a plastic container with a screw top – an old plastic jar or a 4-cup “zip-loc” container with a screw top will do just fine. Then drop in the pills you want to get rid of; give the pills time to dissolve. Then fill the container the rest of the way with kitty litter – the kind that clumps when it gets wet. Screw the cap on tightly and simply throw the container in the trash. The kitty litter will absorb the water and the dissolved medication, so even if the container breaks, it will not easily spill out and critters won't be tempted to eat it.

Third, once you've done that, be sure to destroy the label on the empty medication container or ink out your name and the prescription number with an indelible marking pen before throwing it away.

Admittedly, this method may not be perfect but it's much better than flushing old drugs down the toilet and sending them right back into our drinking water. In time, hopefully, the pharmaceutical industry will step up to the plate and develop a consumer take-back program similar to the programs being developed by the electronics industry. But in the meantime, remember the kitty-litter solution, and you will help in an important way to improve conditions on our crowded planet.