

New Yorkers: “Don’t Flush Your Drugs!”

by Resa Dimino

New York State Governor David Patterson recently announced the Don’t Flush Your Drugs campaign, a new initiative to highlight the hazards of disposing of unused drugs through flushing or other discharges into wastewater systems. The NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) and NYS Department of Health (NYSDOH) have combined efforts to raise public awareness of the growing body of evidence on the presence and impact of pharmaceuticals in the environment.

While the level of risk to humans has not been fully assessed, impacts on aquatic life have been well documented. Due to concerns over the potential impact of long-term human exposure to low levels of pharmaceuticals (such as endocrine disruptors, antibiotics and psychotropics) New Yorkers are being urged to take a precautionary approach to reducing discharges of drugs into the state’s waterways.

Pharmaceuticals enter the wastewater stream through human excretion, manufacturing facility discharges, and by individuals flushing or pouring medications down the drain. In the short term, the campaign’s goal is to reduce the intentional disposal of drugs in wastewater. To that end, the NYSDEC has launched a website (www.dontflushyourdrugs.net) to educate the public on the environmental problems created by flushing pharmaceuticals and proper disposal methods for prescription and over-the-counter drugs in the home.

In addition, the NYSDEC is convening an interagency work group, including NYSDOH, NYS Board of Pharmacy (under the State Education Department) and other state agencies, which will develop new guidance for hospitals and other clinical care facilities promoting environmentally sound practices for the disposal of unused pharmaceuticals. The Pharmaceuticals Work Group will consult with regulated institutions to ensure its recommendations are clear and workable and to plan outreach strategies that will ensure maximum compliance.

The NYSDEC is also encouraged by a number of regional, voluntary

“take back” programs for unused pharmaceuticals. To date there have been four such programs in the state, two sponsored by pharmacy chains and two by counties. (See Westchester County’s pilot program, page 44.) The NYSDEC is engaged with local governments and other stakeholders to expand collection opportunities. The agency is also seeking federal funding for additional pilot projects, such as “mail back” programs, to demonstrate the need for and feasibility of pharmaceutical collection programs.

NYSDEC’s long-term strategy includes: working with the pharmaceutical industry to clean up production sites and reformulate drugs to break down more readily in the environment; researching improved water treatment technologies that might remove these and other emerging contaminants at the end-of-pipe; and developing a sustainable, state-wide collection program for unused pharmaceuticals.

There are many options for managing pharmaceutical waste that warrant further research. For example, many European countries and the Canadian province of British Columbia have developed successful product stewardship programs with drug manufacturers. In some cases manufacturers have established third-party organizations to manage “take back” programs on their behalf.

The NYSDEC believes that citizens cannot wait until pharmaceuticals in waterways pose a significant health threat before taking action. Based on the best science and evidence available, it is clear that a precautionary approach aimed at eliminating the intentional discharge of pharmaceuticals in waterways is both a reasonable and prudent first step. Achieving this goal will require cooperation and collaboration among state agencies, the regulated community, the pharmaceutical industry, and the public. Let’s start now.

Resa Dimino is a special assistant in the Commissioner’s Policy Office, NYS Department of Environmental Conservation. She may be reached at: rdimino@gw.dec.state.ny.us.

Instructions for the Proper Disposal of Household Prescriptions and Over-the-Counter Drugs

NOTE: The following guidelines are for households and individual consumers only.

- **Do NOT flush or pour any drugs down the drain or garbage disposal.** This includes expired and unused prescriptions, over the counter drugs.
- **Where available, take your medications to a local collection event.** Contact your local pharmacy, recycling coordinator, or municipality to find out if there is a household hazardous waste collection* that accepts these materials near you. While waiting for a collection event, keep all medications in a safe, secure place in your home out of reach of children.
- **Important information regarding controlled substances:** To protect public health from unauthorized use of controlled substance medications, the NYS Department of Health must approve events that collect these substances. Before you take controlled substances to a collection event, check with the event organizers to see if they are authorized to accept them.
- **If there is no collection event in your area, dispose of drugs in your household trash.**
- **Before placing in the trash, follow these steps:**
 - To avoid accidental or intentional misuse of drugs, treat medications (liquids and pills) by adding water and then salt,

ashes, dirt, cat litter, coffee grounds, or another undesirable substance.

- Hide all medications in an outer container, such as sealable bag, box or plastic tub to prevent discovery and removal from the trash. Seal the container with strong tape.
- Dispose of drugs as close to your trash collection day as possible to avoid misuse and/or misdirection.
- Do not conceal discarded drugs in food to prevent consumption by scavenging humans or wildlife.

Note: Be careful in handling medications since some drugs can cause harm if handled by people other than those to whom they were prescribed. Also, avoid crushing pills as some medications can be harmful in powder form.

- **Medications self-administered by injection with a needle or “sharp” may be disposed of in the trash.** If such medications include an attached needle, they should be placed in a puncture proof container, sealed with tape and labeled as “sharps.” However, the state *strongly recommends* that medications with attached needles be disposed of at hospital-based household sharps collection programs. All hospitals in New York State (except for federal facilities) are required to collect sharps from households. Medications without attached needles may be disposed of in household trash as described above.