

Kathryn McKenzie: Options for getting rid of old meds

Kathryn McKenzie Living Green Monterey County Herald

Posted:

MontereyHerald.com

The majority of us are on drugs these days. That's what a Mayo Clinic study found recently, with 70 percent of Americans saying they take at least one prescription medication. That's a lot of pills and other items out there.

Now many of us have concerns about the best way to dispose of unused or expired medicines, either our own or those of family members.

Years ago, it was recommended for people to flush old pills down the commode. Now, there's a new protocol: Avoid the toilet.

Because of concerns about how these medications might affect water quality, residents are urged not to flush them, according to Karen Harris of the Monterey Regional Water Pollution Control District.

Trace levels of drug residues are showing up in some water systems and have been found in fish in a few areas, although the jury is still out about how these minute amounts might affect human beings. And, as Harris points out, "Most of these are coming from our bodies, not from medications that have been flushed."

Still, keeping medicines out of our water system seems like the prudent thing to do until we know more about possible effects on the environment.

So what can you do with your old and unwanted prescription drugs? There are several options.

A few local pharmacies will dispose of medications for you; see a list at www.mrwpc.org/education/pharmaceuticals.php. However, some pharmacies will only do it for current customers, or may charge you a fee. It's best to call first and ask.

The second alternative may surprise you. Usually I'm telling you how to keep items out of the landfill, but this is one instance where it is actually better to let the landfill handle these items.

The FDA recommends disposing of medications by removing pills from the original container, and mixing with an undesirable substance like ashes or kitty litter to make them less desirable to children and pets, or people who might go through your trash. Then seal it all in a plastic baggie before placing in the garbage. (Also, before you dispose of the original container, it might be a good idea to ink out identifying information on the label.)

Jeff Lindenthal, public education and recycling manager for the Monterey Regional Waste Management District, said that once the medications are placed in the landfill, there is no chance of them leaking into the groundwater because of the way in which the landfill is sealed.

There is a third option, which is to wait for the Drug Enforcement Agency's National Take-Back Day, held several times a year at local law enforcement agencies. The next one is slated for Oct. 26.

This event is the best way to dispose of prescription drugs that could be abused, such as painkillers or stimulants, but any prescription medication will be accepted.

More information on take-back locations will be available after Oct. 1; see www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug_disposal/takeback.

Do you have questions or comments about sustainable living in Monterey County? Send questions to Kathryn McKenzie at pardonmygarden@att.net.

Follow Living Green at twitter.com/livinggreen2.