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## Got Drugs? Safe Disposal of Medications

By Sophie Braccini



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The Central Contra Costa Solid Waste Authority (CCCSWA) has initiated a pilot program, in partnership with Central Contra Costa Sanitary District (Central San) and the City of Walnut Creek, for the safe disposal of pharmaceuticals. Unfortunately, in spite of these efforts, local pharmacies and agencies still recommend disposal methods for medications that can be dangerous for our environment and, ultimately, for our drinking water.

In an unscientific survey, we made a few phone calls to inquire of some local drugstores and agencies as to how to get rid of expired medications. Evidently, word of the proper method by which to dispose of meds has not reached our local drugstores and public agencies, because we received a variety of questionable advice. Only one pharmacy, the Medicine Shoppe in Orinda Village Square, directed us to the disposal bin at Walnut Creek City Hall.

The first call was to the drugstore at which our caller had purchased a specific medication. "We do not recycle it," said the pharmacy receptionist he was transferred to, "the best way is to leave the medicine in its container, fill it with water, add cayenne pepper, close the bottle, wrap it in duct tape and throw it in the garbage."

Intrigued by this recommendation, our caller contacted other stores that sell medications. He received similar advice from another pharmacy, "put water in the

container, dissolve the material, close it back up and toss it in regular trash," said the clerk, who added, "that's how we do it." A follow-up call to that store's licensed pharmacist yielded a different response. The pharmacist said that they send their expired medicine to an out of state location and get credit back.

However, she too recommended that individuals place expired meds in the trash.

Another drugstore gave similar advice, adding that an alternative would be to bring it to the Contra Costa hazardous waste disposal facility in Martinez.

This kind of advice makes Paul Morsen, CCCSWA Executive Director, very nervous. "You never put medication in the regular trash," he says, "if you send medication to the land fill, through degradation and compression it will find its way into the ground and then the running water that permeates the trash will either be recycled on site or will end up in the Bay." Bringing the medication to the hazardous waste disposal is not a good idea either since this facility is not equipped to dispose of medications.

One of our Lamorinda police departments offered both good and bad advice: "Just flush it down the toilet," said the person our caller spoke to. "Even if it is something more dangerous than old Tylenol?" he asked. "Yes, it's okay," was the response. Or, she said, our caller could go to a regional medical center to dispose safely of his medications.

Michael Scahill, Communication Manager for Central San, could hardly believe that flushing was suggested. "Our treatment plants are not equipped to filter substances that are in medications," he emphasizes, "flushing medication down the toilet is an absolute no-no."

Last December, a five month long investigation by the Associated Press showed that a vast array of pharmaceuticals - including antibiotics, anti-convulsants, mood stabilizers and sex hormones - have been found in the drinking water supplies of at least 41 million Americans.

"Since its installation in February we have collected more than twenty pounds of medication a week," says Scahill, the box is accessible 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. in the Walnut Creek City Hall Lobby, by the Police Department at 1666 North Main St."

Gaylan Ishizu, the pharmacy manager at Long's in Moraga (Rheem), says they return the store's expired medications, but that for his customers safe disposal options are limited. He hopes that there will soon be a safe disposal facility available in Lamorinda for residents.

Two other sites are available in Martinez, at the County Regional Medical Center and the Sheriff's Field Operation Building. Cooperation with law enforcement was a logical step because proper disposal of medication prevents accidental poisoning and abuse of prescription drugs. Additionally, to be able to collect and dispose of medication a site needs a permit by the Federal Drug Enforcement Agency.

After they are collected in the safe boxes, the medications are burned at very high temperature so as to leave no residue. "If the pilot continues according to plan we will expand our program to other police departments that volunteer in the area," said Morsen. After we informed him of the responses to our impromptu survey, Morsen said he would distribute information about the new disposal facility.

At the Moraga Town Liaison meeting on April 10th, Moraga's Interim Chief of Police Robert Priebe said that his department had begun discussions with Central San and CCCSWA to have a disposal box installed the Moraga Police Department at 329 Rheem.

We will let you know when Lamorinda gets a local safe disposal site.

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