

## New program aims to stop pill pollution

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The University of Maine Center on Aging initiated a pilot program that would allow people to use pre-paid mailers to send back unused medications for proper disposal. The program is starting because traces of drugs have been found in water supplies and some fish. (Bangor Daily News Illustration/Gabor Degre) [Buy this](#)



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Bill Miller of Miller Drug in Bangor fills out prescription orders with his employees on Tuesday. (Bangor Daily News File/John Clarke Russ) [Buy this photo](#)

the house — or even tossing them with the trash — is a potential recipe for accidents, abuse or criminal mischief.

Now, the University of Maine is on the verge of launching a first-in-the-nation program aimed at helping consumers get rid of excess drugs in a way that's free and environmentally responsible.

Later this fall, UMaine's Center on Aging will begin a pilot program in which consumers can put unused prescription or unwanted over-the-counter drugs in a pre-addressed, postage-paid

Open up any medicine cabinet in the state of Maine, or across the nation for that matter, and chances are you will find a few containers of unneeded or expired prescription drugs. Some households likely have dozens of half-empty plastic pill vials collecting dust.

For decades, the standard protocol for disposing of leftover drugs was simple and straightforward: Flush them.

Not anymore.

Public health and environmental officials are urging the public to stop giving unwanted drugs the flush treatment after more rivers, streams and even some public water supplies began testing positive for trace amounts of pharmaceuticals.

But officials also warn that keeping potentially dangerous drugs around

pouch.

The free pouches, which will be available at many pharmacies, can be mailed to the Maine Drug Enforcement Agency for proper disposal, likely through special incineration.

The program will launch in four counties — Penobscot, Cumberland, Kennebec and Aroostook — and will be aimed primarily at senior citizens and their caregivers. Center on Aging staff hope to expand the program statewide in early 2008.

If all goes well, Maine's pilot project could become a model for other states.

"We hope to see this rolled out nationally," said Lenard Kaye, director of UMaine's Center on Aging.

Over the past decade, biologists have become increasingly concerned that pharmaceuticals flushed down the drain either as raw pills or in human waste could affect aquatic species. Sewage treatment plants are designed to treat waste and eliminate potentially harmful microorganisms but are ill-equipped to filter out prescription drugs.

The issue grabbed more headlines when fish in Britain and in the Potomac River near Washington, D.C., were found with reproductive abnormalities often associated with excessive hormone levels.

Limited testing of Maine rivers has found traces of estrogenic hormones and chemicals used in anti-bacterial soaps and other products. In one area of the upper Penobscot River below Millinocket and Lincoln, researchers found fish with reproductive abnormalities that could be linked to chemicals in wastewater discharges.

Ann Pistell, an environmental specialist with the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, acknowledged that the state has not done extensive tests looking for prescription drugs but that evidence strongly suggests the drug residues are out there.

The question is how this cocktail of pharmaceuticals, even at low levels, could affect fish and other wildlife.

"The bottom line is a lot of other places around the nation and the world have looked, and when they look they find," Pistell said. "And there is no reason to believe that Maine would be any different from any other place."

Kaye and Jennifer Crittenden, a research associate at the center, are finishing the details with the U.S. Postal Service, the Maine DEA, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and all other agencies involved in the program.

"This is the first time it has ever been done in the country and we are basically writing the rules of how it is going to happen," Crittenden said.

Maine's small size, disproportionate population of older residents and rural character make the state an ideal location to test a statewide drug mail-back program. Unfortunately, Kaye added, there are also good public safety reasons to try out the program in Maine first.

In 2002, 90 percent of drug deaths in the state were caused by prescription drugs. Maine also leads the nation in the relationship between pharmaceuticals and violent or property crimes and ranks second in availability of pharmaceuticals for abuse, according to federal statistics.

"Maine has a big-time prescription drug problem, and when drugs are piling up in the medicine cabinet it makes it even worse," Kaye said.

Leslie M. Ohmart III, a pharmacist at the Penobscot Nation Health Department, said leftover drugs can lead to dangerous and potentially deadly instances of people self-medicating themselves or, even worse, playing doctor with friends or relatives.

Ohmart is enthusiastic about the pilot program. "I think it is probably the most accessible way," he said.

The program is being funded with a \$150,000 grant from the EPA and a matching state appropriation.

Many will be watching how Maine's pilot program pans out.

Mitchel Rothholz, chief of staff at the American Pharmacists Association in Washington, D.C., said drug disposal is a major issue. The association recently partnered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to launch a public awareness campaign about potential environmental impacts of flushing drugs.

Instead of flushing, the organizations recommend crushing, mixing or dissolving unused pharmaceuticals in water and combining the drugs with kitty litter, used coffee grounds or another substance. The mixture then should be placed in a sealed, unmarked plastic bag and disposed of in the trash.

The Food and Drug Administration continues to recommend that some highly addictive or frequently abused drugs, such as OxyContin, Percocet and some morphines, be flushed down the toilet.

Rothholz said some states, such as Washington, are experimenting with drop-off boxes for unused drugs in pharmacies. Some communities, including several in Maine, have held organized collection drives for old pharmaceuticals.

The association is supportive of those as well as Maine's pilot project, he said.

"Any program that tries to address the issue and tries to make something work [without] being a burden is something that we are hopeful for," Rothholz said.

Bangor pharmacist Bill Miller does not believe the program is the silver bullet, but that the mail-back program at least will raise awareness of the issue of excess drugs.

Miller, who runs Miller Drug, said customers ask him almost daily what they should do with unused drugs. The other day a woman asked how to dispose of narcotic painkillers left over after a person in her care died, which is a common story, Miller said.

"I said you don't have much choice but to flush them because you don't want them to end up

in the hands of the wrong person," he said.

Part of the problem, Miller said, is that some patients are given a 90-day prescription when a 30-day supply with refills would work better. But many customers balk at the thought of forking over a prescription co-payment three times instead of once, he said.

"We're all prepared to do whatever necessary to try to make this work," Miller said of the mail-back program. "I can't imagine that anybody would be opposed to it."

*Sources: Office of National Drug Control Policy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, American Pharmacists Association*

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