

# CHI-TOWN DAILY NEWS

Your neighborhood. Your city. Your news.

## MWRD eyes study on drugs in water

BY STEVEN CHAITMAN

July 09, 2008 | 5:51 PM



The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District may soon study how Chicagoans dispose of their unused medication, which could be the first step toward limiting the amount of pharmaceuticals entering the city's water.

The survey, at an estimated cost of just over \$150,000, would be conducted by the University of Illinois-Chicago and aimed at gathering information on what drugs Chicagoans are throwing away, and if they're doing so by flushing them down the toilet.

The district board will decide whether to authorize the study at its meeting tomorrow.

The survey's findings could lead to a public information program focused on safe methods for drug disposal.

The public has yet to realize these chemicals can impact the environment and that there needs to be a good way to manage and dispose of them, says Larry Danziger, a UIC pharmacy professor.

The U.S. Geological Survey studied 139 U.S streams in 1999 and 2000 to determine drug levels in the water.

Eighty percent of the streams had at least one pharmaceutical, hormone or other organic wastewater contaminant.

Jill Horist, spokeswoman for the MWRD, says contamination levels are generally tiny, and that health effects are unclear. But the agency is interested in keeping those levels low in case researchers discover problems in the future, she says.

"Before this is a public safety issue, we want the public to be conscious of how they dispose of their medications and other personal care products," she says.

The MWRD recently established a pharmaceutical waste disposal work group, comprised of government agencies, businesses and nonprofits, to address the issue. The group recommended a more unified public awareness strategy, Horist says.

"One goal is to make a cohesive and coherent message for the public to hear over and over again," Horist said.

Other states have moved aggressively to control drug disposal.

Last year, Maine established a pilot program that provides customers with return envelopes when they pick up prescriptions.

"Five years ago I would have been ignorant to what the key benefits of doing this program were," says Len Kaye, director of the University of Maine's Center on Aging, which runs the program.

"Now I'm completely convinced that if we can get drugs out of people's homes we can improve the health of our environment, it will be good for every living person both human and animal, and prevent accidental overdose and poisoning," he says.

In New Hampshire, officials have held waste collection days for consumers to drop off unused medicine, says Sara Johnson, a program manager at the state's Department of Environmental Services.

The board meets at 10 a.m. tomorrow morning at 100 East Erie St.

Tagged: [Knight News Challenge](#), [Near North Side](#), [pharmaceutical disposal study](#), [University of Illinois-Chicago](#), [Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Chicago](#)