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Dangers of unused drugs getting more attention in Maine

A limited mail-in program and local 'take-back' events help prevent misuse or abuse.

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Mainers are getting more ways to dispose of unused prescription drugs, and the campaign to collect them may someday help prevent some of them from accumulating in the first place.

Unused drugs create two undesirable side effects that aren't found on their prescription labels.

People who find they have pills left over simply flush them down the toilet. That puts powerful drugs, including hormones and addictive substances, into the water we drink and many other species live in.

The other danger is that half-empty bottles of drugs can sit in medicine cabinets for weeks, months or even years. Then they can be taken by mistake or self-prescribed for new or recurring illnesses.

Or, they can be scooped up and consumed or sold by others, including young relatives or visitors. This practice, called "pharming" on the street, can result in overdoses or even deaths.

To counter such abuses, about a dozen pharmacies in four counties participate in a "safe disposal" program (www.safemeddisposal.com) run by the University of Maine and other groups. Senior citizens or their caregivers are given pre-stamped envelopes to mail unused medications back to the issuing pharmacy.

While it's clearly not adequate to meet the entire state's need, the program will expand in the fall to cover all age groups and include stores statewide. In addition, some organizations hold periodic local "take-back" events for unused drugs.

The Maine Drug Enforcement Agency plans to study what drugs have been turned in to help medical providers prescribe them in ways that can minimize waste.

That would be the long-term solution this problem requires.

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