

TO flush or NOT to flush, this is the question!  
By Jim Heyen, Wastewater Technician

My wife (Deb) and I have always tried to take a little time together and it usually is Sunday morning reading the newspaper and enjoying a cup (or two) of coffee. Since we have become empty nesters, our Sunday morning conversation, paper and coffee no longer just include reading the important sections (sports, obits & police reports), I have found myself reading other sections, such as, the advice columns. Now I wouldn't just share this with anyone, but there are a few important issues addressed in these sections and I happened upon on such subject.

The question that was posed "Does discarded medication pollute water?" Your first reaction would be, sure they do, but ask your wife what he does with the unused/outdated medications from your medicine chest and I would bet her answer would be flush them down the toilet. I am sure she also can justify her actions by saying, "she wouldn't want small children to come across them and take them by accident". Our first response is in relationship to a short term problem and fail to look any farther, including, what happens to these drugs after flushing?

Many drugs break down in water, so consequently, may directly be put into our rivers and streams. Drugs such as hormones or birth control pills for example are compounds, which have an immediate impact on the discharge location.

Hormones and antibiotics, which are first treated in a water purification wastewater treatment facility can be eliminated, however, most plants in Nebraska do not use this process. Harmful drugs are indirectly being dumped into our waterways and possibly endangering wildlife and other living things. Many of you eat the fish you catch from Nebraska rivers and streams, the accumulation of hormones and medications in fish flesh could cause other problems.

The best solution would be to increase public awareness on the effects of dumping drugs down their drains and then offer safer disposing alternatives. Most people do not give much thought to the wastewater process, just expect it to be there and working! Educate your community on the effects of disposing harmful drugs into the wastewater system and then supply them with alternatives to flushing. Check with your local pharmacy to see if they except unwanted/outdated drugs to be disposed of properly. Other resources might be to contact your local health department or bring them to a hazardous waste disposal day.

Being a rural state, many of these options are not available, the lesser of two evils would be putting them in the garbage. I know we are still possibly altering the eco-system but at least in landfills the drugs will be exposed to bacteria and other things, which will assist in their breakdown.

All of this from an advice column! I'm still trying to remember when we changed from sweet rolls with our coffee to bagels!

Sources:

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