



NYS Department of Environmental Conservation  
NYS Education Department



# IMPORTANT MESSAGE

## Help Protect New York's Waters

**Don't Flush** Unwanted Household  
Medications or Pour Them Down the Drain

**Return** to collection  
events where available

or

**Mix** with something  
undesirable such as coffee  
grounds, cat litter or dirt

**Tape** up containers

**Toss** in your garbage



For full instructions or designated collection events visit:

[www.dontflushyourdrugs.net](http://www.dontflushyourdrugs.net)





Department of  
Environmental  
Conservation

## Information for Households

### Recommended Drug Disposal Options

**Where available, the best option is to take your medications to a local collection event.**

See the schedule of [pharmaceutical collection events](#) in New York State.

While waiting for a collection event, keep all medications in a safe, secure place in your home out of reach of children and pets. If you cannot ensure that there will be no unauthorized or accidental use of the medications (including controlled substances such as fentanyl, oxycodone, etc) by children or others, it is best to dispose of them as soon as possible. Follow the instructions on the package or use the trash disposal steps listed below.

Note: Most Household Hazardous Waste Collections **will not** accept pharmaceuticals.

#### **\* Important information regarding controlled substances:**

To guard against unauthorized use of controlled substance medications, the NYS Department of Health must approve events that collect these substances. Before you take controlled substances to a collection event, check with the event organizers to see if they are authorized to accept them.

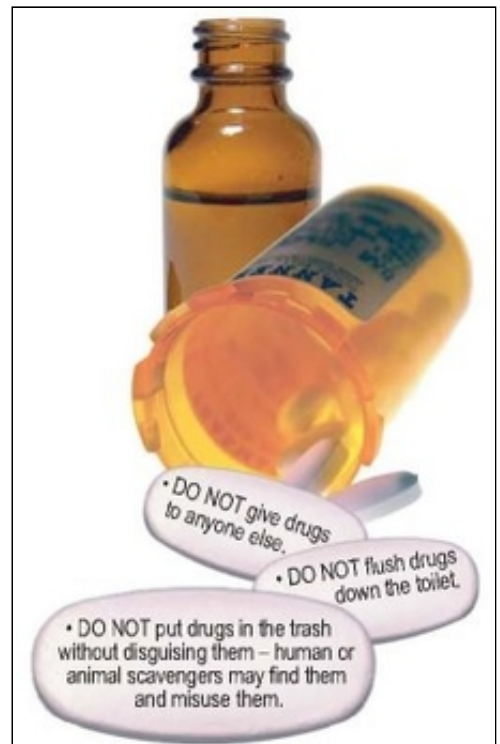
#### **If a pharmaceutical collection is not available, follow these steps to dispose of drugs in the trash:**

- Treat medications (liquids and pills) by adding water and then salt, ashes, dirt, cat litter, coffee grounds, or another undesirable substance, to avoid accidental or intentional misuse of drugs. Do not conceal discarded drugs in food to prevent consumption by scavenging humans, pets or wildlife.
- Hide all medications in an outer container, such as sealable bag, box or plastic tub to prevent discovery and removal from the trash. Seal the container with strong tape.
- Dispose of drugs as close to your trash collection day as possible to avoid misuse and/or misdirection.

**Note:** Be careful in handling medications. Some drugs can cause harm if handled by people other than those to whom they were prescribed. Also, avoid crushing pills as some medications can be harmful in powder form.

#### **Medications self-administered by injection with a needle or "sharp" may be disposed of in the trash.**

If such medications include an attached needle, they should be placed in a puncture proof container, sealed with tape and labeled as "sharps." However, the state *strongly recommends* that medications



*A portion of prescription and over-the-counter medications will not be used*

with attached needles be disposed of at hospital-based household sharps collection programs. All hospitals in New York State (except for federal facilities) are required to collect sharps from households.

*and if flushed or poured down the drain,  
can end up in our rivers and streams*

**Medications without attached needles may be disposed of in household trash as described above.**



**Department of  
Environmental  
Conservation**

## FAQs About Proper Disposal of Drugs

**In the past, we were told it was best to dispose of medications by flushing them. What has changed?**

There is a new awareness about the potential harmful effects of medications on fish and other aquatic life.

DEC recommends that no drugs be flushed. Additionally, DEC encourages all households to take unused or unwanted household drugs to a pharmaceutical collection. Check with your Town, County, City, or local pharmacy about any upcoming collections.

**What do you mean by drugs and pharmaceuticals?**

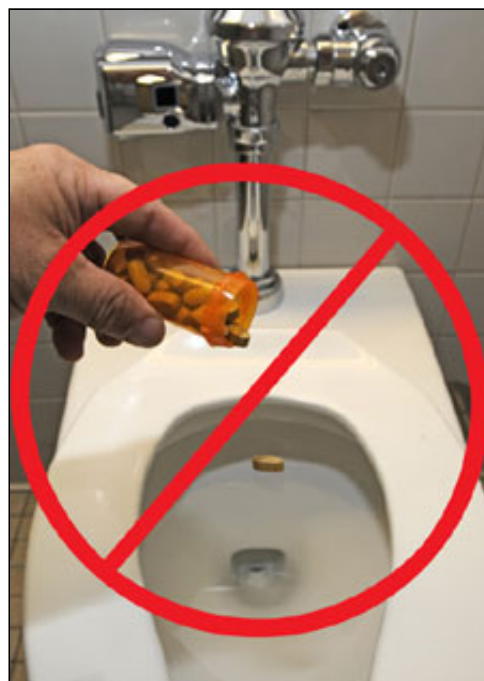
We use the terms "pharmaceuticals," "drugs," and "medications" interchangeably to mean all prescription and over-the-counter human and veterinary medicines.

**Are pharmaceuticals in our waters "new" or just newly discovered?**

Recent advances in technology have made it possible to test for low levels of pharmaceuticals in water. Once they were found in wastewater, researchers realized it was likely that some drugs had been reaching our waters for as long as people have been manufacturing and taking them.

**How do drugs get into our waters?**

Drugs enter our waters from many sources. These include, but are not limited to, unused medications flushed down the toilet or poured down the drain in households and health care institutions, discharges from pharmaceutical manufacturing facilities. Other potential sources include drugs in composted sewage sludge and manure from farm animals which may be washed into our waters by rainfall. Finally, humans are a major source as much of the drugs that people take pass through the body, and into the wastewater.



*Flushing is no longer the preferred way to dispose of unwanted drugs. Disguise and put in the trash instead*

**Does wastewater treatment remove drugs before they reach our waters?**

Waste water treatment plants were not designed to specifically remove drugs from wastewater. Although some may be reduced, others apparently are not. There are technologies available that could be added to foster removal but they are very costly, energy consuming and not feasible.

**Can drugs actually be harmful to fish and other aquatic life?**

Yes. For example, certain drugs can cause male fish to develop female characteristics. These "intersex fish" have been found in some rivers throughout the county, particularly downstream of wastewater treatment plants serving large municipal areas. These fish often do not reproduce.

**Many drugs are intended for, prescribed for, and safe for human use. Why might very low levels of them in our water be a concern to human health?**

We don't know yet the effects, if any, of long-term exposure to very low concentrations on human health.

To date, no studies have shown an effect on human health associated with the findings of pharmaceuticals in our water resources. However, DEC (which protects drinking water supplies) and the NYS Department of Health (which protects actual drinking water) agree that a prudent, appropriate health-protective approach is to reduce the discharge of all chemicals, including pharmaceuticals, into our waters.

**If prescriptions and other medications are expired, why should we be concerned that they might harm the environment?**

Expired medicines and prescriptions, even if not at full strength, may still be potent enough to harm fish and other organisms.

**Does DEC allow the discharge of pharmaceutical waste into surface waters or groundwater?**

The discharge of chemicals into the waters of the state is regulated through permits based on ambient water quality standards, guidance values, and on treatment technologies. Standards and guidance values are derived from toxicological data on the risk these compounds might have to humans and wildlife exposed through water. For the most part, data is not yet available that could be used to derive appropriate limits for the wide range of pharmaceuticals being detected in water.

One of the goals of the "Don't Flush" campaign is to help keep these compounds out of water until the risks can be fully evaluated.

**What is the New York Drug Management and Disposal Act and what does it require?**

Effective March 24, 2009, the New York Drug Management and Disposal Act amended the NYS Environmental Conservation Law relative to the management and disposal of drugs. It includes the following requirements:

- A. Directs NYSDEC to develop and implement a public information program on the proper storage and disposal of drugs and establish a notice containing such information;
- B. Requires all pharmacies and other retailers in NYS that sell drugs to post a notice on the proper disposal of drugs in a public location. [See the sample poster and guidelines](#)

**Does DEC have flyers or posters that we can use?**

A [poster](#) that can be downloaded and printed is available. Citation of NYS DEC as the source would be appreciated.

Municipalities, organizations, and companies can include a Don't Flush message in their communications with their citizens and customers; contact us for recommended language and further detail.

**Are veterinarians required to conspicuously display the poster?**

Answer: Yes. Veterinarians, veterinary hospitals, and veterinary clinics that sell prescription or over-the-counter drugs are required by law to display the poster.

**My local pharmacy or grocery store that sells drugs does not have the poster that is required. What should we do?**

People can let DEC know if their local store or veterinary office does not have the poster conspicuously displayed. Contact us at [DOWinformation@dec.ny.gov](mailto:DOWinformation@dec.ny.gov) or call the Division of Water at 518-402-8233

**How has DEC reached out with the Don't Flush Your Drugs message, and more generally, how has DEC informed the public about pharmaceuticals in our waters?**

DEC added information on the disposal of pharmaceuticals to this website in 2008 and issued a press release on August 8, 2008 to raise awareness of this emerging issue. Other efforts include interviews on regional radio and television stations; presentations to a wide variety of audiences including the public, scientific conferences, workshops, pharmaceutical organizations, and the NYS Business Council; and



posters displayed at the New York State Fair and in NYS Thruway rest areas.

**The Federal Government still recommends flushing certain drugs. What guidelines should New Yorkers follow?**

DEC believes that no drugs should be flushed. Households should bring their unused drugs to local collection events where collected drugs will be properly destroyed via incineration. Keep all medicines in a secure place in your home out of reach of pets, children and others that could misuse them. If there is no event available in the near future, follow the [instructions to safely dispose of drugs](#) in your household trash.

**I have heard that drugs have been detected in liquid seeping from landfills. Why does DEC encourage people to put drugs in their trash?**

DEC believes the best option for disposing of unwanted/expired household drugs is to bring them to a household drug collection event where collected drugs are properly destroyed via incineration.

If a collection event is not available near you, disposal in household trash is preferred over flushing? Prepare them according to DEC's recommendations found at [www.dontflushyourdrugs.net](http://www.dontflushyourdrugs.net).

Additionally, ask your local pharmacy or county government to host a drug collection event. Information on [how to hold a collection event](#).

**Why don't most household hazardous waste (HHW) collections accept medications?**

Historically pharmaceuticals were not collected at HHW collections. In light of the recent finding that pharmaceuticals are entering waterways, communities are expanding collections when possible to include pharmaceuticals. Collecting drugs at a HHW event however is expensive for the facility. Collecting pharmaceuticals can involve a licensed pharmacist, who can identify, sort, and record the pharmaceuticals accepted and a law enforcement officer to take possession of the collected drugs and transport them to a waste to energy incineration facility. Disposal of the collected drugs can also be costly to the sponsors of the collection program.

**I see guidance for household disposal of drugs on the DEC website. But we are an institution-- what should we do with unused drugs?**

Institutions should always try to return expired medications to manufacturers. Known as "reverse distribution," this method is a way for pharmacies, hospitals and other facilities to return unused or expired medications to the manufacturer for potential credit.

Oversight of controlled substances is through the NYS Department of Health's Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement.

DEC has worked closely with the NYS Department of Health (DOH) on recommendations for proper management/disposal of unused medications at health care institutions. These recommendations are being provided to institutions. DEC does not recommend the flushing of any unused medications by either households or institutions.

**We are a small outpatient mental health program that receives free samples of pharmaceuticals, some of which expire and need to be disposed of. We are not a pharmacy. Are we a household or an institution?**

If your program provides prescription medicine to patients, then your program is not considered a household, and is regulated by Department Of Health as an institution. You should make arrangements with a company that provides disposal services for these kinds of materials.

**Should I save my unused or unwanted medications for the next household drug collection day?**

When to dispose of your unwanted drugs is your decision, but DEC believes the best option for disposing of unwanted/expired household drugs is to bring them to a household drug collection where collected drugs are properly destroyed via incineration. Remember if you do choose to save medications for a collection, keep all medicines in a secure place in your home out of reach of pets, children and others that could misuse them. If you do choose to dispose of them, please do so [according to safe disposal practices](#).

**When is the next collection event in my area?**

See the list of upcoming household drug collections.

**How do I host a collection event in my community?**

Any community can host a household collection event with the proper approvals. If the pharmaceuticals are collected from households, a variance from NYSDEC is required to dispose of the collected pharmaceuticals at a solid waste combustor in New York State. Furthermore, if controlled substances are collected from households at the event, approval from the New York State Department of Health, Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement is required. Please contact Melissa Treers for further information at (518) 402-8706.

**What can I do to help protect New York's waters from drugs?**

Don't Flush Your Drugs! Tell your friends, co-workers, and customers not to flush their drugs.

If a household collection event is not available, dispose of them in your trash, preparing them according to DEC's recommendations.

Ask your pharmacy or local or county government to host a household drug collection event. See Question 22 for contact information or email us at [DOWinformation@dec.ny.gov](mailto:DOWinformation@dec.ny.gov) for the details on how to do this.

Municipalities, organizations, and companies can include a Don't Flush message in their communications with their citizens and customers; contact us for recommended language and further detail.

Links to DEC's pharmaceutical disposal pages are welcome.

**Can DEC provide a speaker for our event?**

We will try. Contact us at [DOWinformation@dec.ny.gov](mailto:DOWinformation@dec.ny.gov) or use the contact information in the right column of the [www.dontflushyourdrugs.net](http://www.dontflushyourdrugs.net) web page.

**I have further questions. How do I contact someone at DEC?**

Contact us at [DOWinformation@dec.ny.gov](mailto:DOWinformation@dec.ny.gov) or call us at 518-402-8233.



*For a household hazardous waste collection to accept unwanted drugs, a licensed pharmacist must be present (Photo courtesy Northeast Recycling Council)*