

ASBURY PARK PRESS TUESDAY, NOV. 6, 2007

Rx for. dumping pills:

Mix with kitty litter

Experts rescind advice to flush meds

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON - It's time to pooper-scoop your leftover medicine.

Mixing cough syrup, Vicodin or Lipitor with cat litter is the new advice on getting rid of unused medications. Preferably used cat litter.

It's a compromise, better for the environment than flushing - and one that renders dangerous medicines too yucky to try if children, pets or drug abusers stumble through the trash.

A government experiment is about to send that advice straight to thousands of patients who use potent painkillers, sleeping pills and other controlled substances.

Why? Prescription drug abuse is on the rise, and research suggests more than half of people who misuse those drugs get them for free from a friend or relative. In other words, having leftovers in the medicine cabinet is a risky idea. Anyone visiting your house could swipe them.

So 6,300 pharmacies around the country have signed up for a pilot project with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. When patients fill prescriptions for a list of abuse-prone medicines, from Ambien to Vicodin, the pharmacist also will hand over a flier urging them to take the cat-litter step if they don't wind up using all their pills.

Not a cat owner? Old coffee grounds work, or doggie doo, even sawdust. Just seal the meds and the, er, goop in a plastic bag before tossing in the trash.

"We don't want to assert that- this is a panacea for the larger problem," says SAMHSA's Dr. H. Westley Clark. "It just provides them with a caveat that these are: not things you can just lay: around."

But the concern isn't only about controlled substances. How .to best-dispose of any medicine, whether prescription or over-the-counter, is a growing issue.

No one knows just how many unused drugs Americans dump each year, or how' many are hoarded because patients simply don't know what to do with them or that they: should dispose of them.

Once, patients were told to, flush old drugs down the toilet. No more - do not flush unless you have one of the few prescriptions that the Food and Drug Administration specifically labels for flushing.

That's because antibiotics, hormones and other drugs are; being found in waterways, raising worrisome questions about potential health and environmental effects. Already, studies have linked hormone exposure to fish abnormalities. Germs exposed to antibiotics in the environment may become more drug-resistant.

Some communities set aside: "take-back" days to return left-over doses to pharmacies or other collection sites for hazardous-waste incineration. The Environmental Protection Agency recently funded a novel pilot program by the University of Maine to see if consumers will mail back unused drugs - a program that local officials estimate: could cull up to 1.5 tons of: medications.

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"There is a \$64,000 question: here: whether people really will get rid of it," says Carol J. Boyd, director of the University of Michigan's Institute for Research on Women and Gender and a well-known specialist on drug diversion.