

## Take Back Your Meds: Help Fight Pharmaceutical Pollution

**“Pharmaceuticals have become a significant water pollutant nationwide”**

according to a recent report by the President’s Cancer Panel. Each year roughly 33 million containers of medicine are left unused in Washington State. These medicines are extremely potent chemicals and most designate as dangerous or hazardous waste when leftover or expired.

Unfortunately, most people don’t know how to properly dispose of unused medicines, or don’t have good options in their community for environmentally sound disposal.

Flushing unneeded medicines down the toilet or sink sends these toxic chemicals out into our rivers, marine waters, and water supplies – potentially harming aquatic ecosystems and exposing our families. Putting medicines into the trash is not the answer either. Landfills for household garbage are not designed to store and treat hazardous waste. **You wouldn’t put used motor oil in the garbage – why would you put potentially lethal leftover medicines in the trash can?**

**Take Back Your Meds** is a group of environmental organizations, health organizations, police, drugstores, local governments, and others demanding a state-wide program for the safe return and environmentally-sound disposal of leftover medicines.

### How do pharmaceuticals get into our environment?

Major sources of pharmaceutical pollution are: improper disposal of waste medicines (from flushing or trash disposal), excretion from our bodies, and industrial pollution from drug manufacturing facilities.

Wastewater treatment facilities and septic systems are not designed to remove or destroy pharmaceuticals that are flushed away. Drugs also enter wastewater facilities through landfill leachate – or “garbage juice” – the water that seeps through garbage. Leachate is pumped out of most lined landfills in wet areas of our state and shipped to wastewater facilities. Many drugs pass right through wastewater treatment and are discharged into waterways, others settle out into biosolids that are often applied to land as fertilizer. New treatment technologies to remove some drugs are being explored, but it would cost billions of dollars to upgrade wastewater systems in our state. It is much more cost-effective to prevent these drugs from going down the drain in the first place.



*“There’s no doubt about it, pharmaceuticals are being detected in the environment and there is genuine concern that these compounds, in the small concentrations that they’re at, could be causing impacts to human health or to aquatic organisms.”*

**-Mary Buzby,  
Director of  
Environmental  
Rechnology for  
Merck & Co.  
Pharmaceuticals,  
USA Today,  
March 2008**

## What are pharmaceuticals in our waters doing to us?

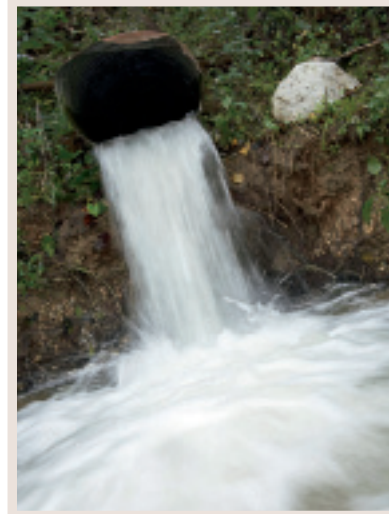
What we know is that even the low levels of medicines found in our waterways hurt fish and other aquatic life. Researchers have observed negative changes in fish including altered reproductive function, lethargic behavior, and a decreased ability to compete. And a range of medicines show up in the tissues of fish and other aquatic species, which are part of our food chain.

(see [www.TakeBackYourMeds.org](http://www.TakeBackYourMeds.org) for more information)

A wide range of medicines are in our waterways. Recent studies have found:

- Medicines – including heart medication, pain relievers, tranquilizers, anti-seizure medicines, and antibiotics – in the drinking water of 24 major U.S. metropolitan areas.
- Medicines in the Columbia River and in the treated wastewater going into local waters of Olympia, Lacey, Puyallup and Tacoma, and in the Sequim-Dungeness region.
- Synthetic hormones from medicines in lakes and streams in King County.
- Medicines coming from septic systems in Liberty Bay near Poulsbo.

With thousands of different medicines entering our environment, even at very low levels, potential health impacts for people are a concern. **We need to ask ourselves “what can we do right now to keep medicines**



## What can we do right now?

If we don't begin to act now, we are passing the problem of pharmaceutical pollution on to future generations. A medicine take-back system is a simple and cost-effective way to keep waste medicines – estimated to be about one-third of all prescription and over-the-counter drugs sold each year – from getting into our waters and our environment. Unused medicines can be safely collected and properly disposed of through high-temperature incineration at properly permitted facilities.

If your community has a temporary medicine take-back program, use it! Unfortunately funding for medicine take-back programs is unstable and programs are not available in most communities in our state.

**Washington needs a sustainable, statewide medicine take-back program.** It is time for the drug companies – who make and sell medicines – to step up and provide a statewide program to safely collect and dispose of the leftovers, just as they already do in other countries.

**Learn More...** Washington's Secure Medicine Take-Back Bill SB5234/HB1370 at [www.takebackyourmeds.org/make-it-happen/proposed-state-law](http://www.takebackyourmeds.org/make-it-happen/proposed-state-law)

## Find out more and get involved.



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