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HEALTHCAST

Scientists stumped over proper disposal of old medicine



From NBC12 News

You may be an expert at recycling the papers, plastics and glass in your home, but what about the stuff that's in your medicine cabinet?

It seems even the experts can't agree on what's the environmentally-friendly way to get rid of old drugs.

“That's a tricky question. There is not a simple answer,” said environmental educator Rachel Smith. "It's not just different environmental issues. There's controlled and non-controlled substances, so it's really a very multifaceted problem.”

Howard Weinberg, an environmental chemist at the University of North Carolina, agrees.

“There's a lot of information about the side effects of the drugs or what you shouldn't take them with,” Weinberg said, “but there's no information about what to do with the drugs if you don't use them or if they are expired."

For years, the public was told to flush away leftover drugs.

Then, scientists discovered the practice was sending drug remnants into bodies of water, affecting the aquatic environment and trickling through the taps.

However, Dr. George Gray of the Environmental Protection Agency says only low amounts of pharmaceuticals have been found in the bodies of water that we use for drinking.

“It is important to note that there is no scientific evidence linking that low level of pharmaceuticals to any adverse effects in people,” Gray said.

Still, the federal government recently released prescription disposal guidelines that discourage flushing most drugs.

“The best thing is to remove an unneeded, unwanted or expired drug from the container and mix it in with trash,” Gray said.

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