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Drug Take-Back Programs Prove Insufficient, New Report Finds

Despite extensive efforts, Wisconsin programs collect just 2 percent of household pharmaceutical waste; the remainder is landfilled, flushed or stored indefinitely, posing health and environmental risks

MADISON, Wisc.—More than 4 million pounds of prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) household medications in Wisconsin get improperly stored or discarded via landfilling or flushing each year, resulting in potential human and environmental toxicity risks, according to a new study by the University of Wisconsin-Extension and the Product Stewardship Institute (PSI). This staggering statistic holds true despite costly and time-intensive voluntary efforts to manage leftover pharmaceuticals safely.

“We’ve gathered the best available data to estimate how much waste is being produced and how it’s being managed in Wisconsin,” says Steve Brachman, waste reduction specialist with University of Wisconsin-Extension. “And, despite the rapid growth of ongoing drug take-back programs, we found that most people are still throwing their drugs away, flushing them, or storing them indefinitely.”

The urgency behind addressing the problem of household pharmaceutical waste disposal stems from the health, safety, and environmental dangers associated with improperly storing or discarding OTC and non-OTC medications. First, controlled substances stored in the home are linked to drug abuse, overdose, or accidental ingestion by children and pets. In fact, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more people die from prescription drug abuse and poisonings than from traffic accidents. Second, pharmaceuticals that are flushed or landfilled can contaminate surface waters and threaten aquatic ecosystems. This is because wastewater treatment plants are not designed to eliminate all pharmaceuticals. Drugs that are disposed of in household trash and taken to landfills may eventually end up in landfill leachate, much of which is treated at these same wastewater treatment plants.

“There is clearly a great need for consumer outreach and education about this important issue,” says Scott Cassel, PSI’s founder and chief executive officer. “When used as intended, medications can mean
the difference between life and death for some people. But when they’re mismanaged, the consequences can be devastating.”

Given public safety concerns about pharmaceuticals disposal, over the past two years, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has funded five one-day drug take-back events for many communities in Wisconsin and around the country. However, since these programs were never intended to be permanent, Brachman says, when the DEA funding dries up, local governments will be faced with an enormous challenge of securing sustainable funding to keep these programs running.

“We need a system that allows us to meet the high and growing demand for pharmaceutical take-back programs without posing a burden on state or local governments,” says Brachman.

“We believe that the producers of these pharmaceuticals should step forward and work with us to devise and carry out a long-term solution to this multi-faceted problem,” Cassel adds. “It’s not just environmental; it’s not just health and safety-related; and it’s not just financial. It’s all of the above.”

The report, which was written under contract with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR), also cites high costs, lack of sustainable funding, consumer inconvenience, government regulation of controlled substances, limited in-state capacity for pharmaceuticals destruction, inadequate program promotion, and low public awareness as barriers to effective waste pharmaceutical collection programs in Wisconsin. It then evaluates successful industry-run programs in Canada, France, Spain, Sweden, and Australia, and suggests that they serve as models for Wisconsin.


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About the Product Stewardship Institute (PSI)

The Product Stewardship Institute (PSI) is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to reducing the health and environmental impacts of consumer products. PSI brings together key stakeholders with differing interests to develop product end-of-life solutions in a collaborative manner, with a focus on having manufacturers assume primary financial and managerial responsibility. With a robust membership base of 47 state governments and over 200 local governments, as well as partnerships with more than 80 companies, organizations, universities, and non-U.S. governments, PSI advances both voluntary programs and legislation to promote industry-led product stewardship initiatives. For more information, visit PSI online at www.productsstewardship.us. You can also follow PSI on Twitter at twitter.com/ProductSteward and on Facebook at facebook.com/ProductStewardship.

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