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“Get the Meds Out” Mail-back Aims to Protect Great Lakes, Prevent Drug Abuse

MILWAUKEE (August 18, 2011) - The University of Wisconsin-Extension is launching a new pharmaceutical mail-back program in Wisconsin this month in an effort to safely prevent unwanted medications from entering the Great Lakes or being abused in Wisconsin homes.

The program, called Get the Meds Out, provides free postage-paid padded envelopes to participating pharmacies, senior centers, and county health departments in the 36 Wisconsin Great Lakes watershed counties. Residents can use the envelopes to mail unused prescription and over-the-counter drugs to a central location where they will be safely destroyed.

The program is being funded by a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as part of the EPA’s Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. More than 300 pharmacies and other locations have already signed up to participate.

“In the past, a number of Wisconsin municipalities held one-day events to collect unwanted medications and other hazardous substances and dispose of them safely, but those weren’t always convenient for people with chronic illnesses or the elderly, and sometimes the collection points couldn’t accept controlled medications,” said Steve Brachman, waste reduction specialist with the University of Wisconsin-Extension.

“Evidence of potential pharmaceutical contamination of the Great Lakes plus Wisconsin’s rising incidence of prescription drug abuse points to the need for a more comprehensive approach to medicine disposal including a mail-back option.”

Unused medicines can be a danger to kids, pets and other household members. They may also have a negative impact on water and soil quality. Flushing medications down the toilet, once thought to be the best method of drug disposal, is no longer recommended since even advanced municipal wastewater treatment systems cannot completely remove pharmaceutical compounds. Thus, these compounds are often discharged back into the environment. Get the Meds Out provides a convenient and environmentally safe way to clean out the medicine cabinet.

Residents can take the pre-addressed and pre-paid envelopes home, fill them with their unwanted medicines and drop them into a regular mailbox. All envelopes are sent to the Maine Drug Enforcement Agency, where they will be sorted and sent for safe disposal.

The UW-Extension decided to collaborate with the Safe Medicine Disposal for ME Program, the first pharmaceutical mail-back program in the country, because they
were able to receive controlled substances through the mail, Brachman noted. The Maine program began in 2008.

Wisconsin’s Get the Meds Out program is scheduled to run though September 2012.

The participating counties are Adams, Ashland, Bayfield, Brown, Calumet, Columbia, Door, Douglas, Florence, Fond du Lac, Forest, Green Lake, Iron, Kenosha, Kewaunee, Langlade, Manitowoc, Marathon, Marinette, Marquette, Menominee, Milwaukee, Oconto, Oneida, Outagamie, Ozaukee, Portage, Racine, Shawano, Sheboygan, Vilas, Washington, Waukesha, Waupaca, Waushara and Winnebago Counties. These include several counties where only a portion of the acreage is part of the Great Lakes watershed.

For a county-by-county list of locations where residents can obtain mail-back envelopes, visit http://www4.uwm.edu/shwec/meds/index.cfm

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