

Unwanted Medicines: Health and Safety Concerns

The Secure Medicine Return Bill (HB 1165 / SB 5279) will create a producer-provided medicine return program that is convenient, safe and secure for residents throughout the state. Left-over and expired prescription and over-the-counter medicines will be collected and disposed using the safest technology currently available to help prevent accidental poisonings, drug misuse, and environmental contamination. This background document provides brief summaries and references about unwanted medicines, and the problem of accidental poisonings and drug diversion.

The Amount of Unwanted Medicines Is Significant

The amount of prescription and over-the-counter medicines that go unused, or expire, or are unwanted has not been precisely determined. But there is evidence and estimates that the amount of unwanted medicines is significant.

- In a 2006 telephone survey of King County residents, 39 percent of respondents said they had more than ten medicine containers at home, and of these, only a third were using—or planning to use—all of their medicines in the following six months.
SoundStats Survey “Unwanted Household Medicines: A Survey of King County Residents” 2006. Washington Citizens for Resource Conservation. <http://wastenotwashington.org/Pharmsurvey.pdf>
- A 2005 study in Britain showed that whether or not people typically finished their medicines depended on the type of medicine. 20% of respondents didn’t use all of their pain medicines, 50% didn’t finish antidepressants or beta blockers, and 82% didn’t use all of their antibiotics
Bound, J. P. and Voulvoulis, N., 2005, *Household Disposal of Pharmaceuticals as a Pathway for Aquatic Contamination in the United Kingdom*, Environmental Health Perspectives Volume 113, Number 12, Dec. 2005. Available online at: <http://www.ehponline.org/members/2005/8315/8315.pdf>, accessed 08/26/08.
- “More than half of the patients surveyed in a study conducted in the U.S. reported storing unused and expired medications in their homes, and more than half had flushed them down a toilet.”
From *Pharmaceuticals in the Environment: Sources, Fate, Effects and Risks*, Kummerer, Klaus (editor). 2008. *Third Edition*. (Springer), referring to original research by Seehusen, DA and Edwards, J. 2006. Patient practices and beliefs concerning disposal of medications. J. Am Board Fam Med. 19: 542-547.
- Washington State’s PH:ARM pilot – led by Group Health Cooperative and Bartell Drugs, along with a collaborative of state and local governments and non-profit organizations – has been taking back unwanted medicines from residents in Washington State since October 2006. The Group Health locations collected more than 15,000 pounds of unwanted medicines (in original containers) with little advertising at 25 pharmacy drop-off locations in six counties. For more information, see <http://www.medicinereturn.com>.

Unwanted medicines in our homes contribute to risks of accidental poisonings

Accidental poisonings are a significant health care problem and expense in our state. Residents who store or save their unneeded medications in their homes are increasing risks of accidental poisonings.

- In Washington State, accidental poisonings have grown 395% since 1990, with 85% of unintentional poisoning deaths involving medications in 2006.
Washington State Department of Health, 2008, *Washington State Injury and Violence Prevention Guide-Poisoning and Drug Overdose*. Injury & Violence Prevention Program, DOH Publication No. 530-090. Available online at: <http://www.doh.wa.gov/hsqa/emstrauma/injury/pubs/icpg/DOH530090Poison.pdf>, accessed 08/26/08.
- Thirty two percent of deaths in Washington children were caused by someone else’s prescription medication and 26 percent were caused by over-the-counter medications. The

second leading cause of injury hospitalization for Washington children 0 – 17 years old was injuries from poisonings. The 15 – 17 age group had the highest injury rates from poisoning.

Washington State Childhood Injury Report – Poisoning, 2004 Available online at http://www.doh.wa.gov/hsqa/emstrauma/injury/pubs/wscir/WSCIR_Poisoning.pdf

- More than half, or 36,770, of the exposure calls reported by the Washington Poison Center involved children under six, and almost half of these children were poisoned by medicines. The elderly are also at risk of accidental poisonings: in 2007, over 7,000 calls to the Poison Center were from the older adult population and 66% of these involved medications.

Washington Poison Center website, http://www.wapc.org/resources/wapc_resources.htm, 2007

Unwanted medicines in our homes increase opportunities for drug abuse and drug diversion

- Over half of the people using prescription drugs for nonmedical reasons obtained them from a friend or relative.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2007. *Results from the 2006 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings*. Office of Applied Studies, NSDUH Series H-32, DHHS Publication No. SMA 07-4293). Available online at: <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/nsduh/2k6nsduh/2k6Results.cfm#TOC>, accessed 08/25/08.

- Abuse of prescription drugs is a growing problem among teens.
 - Prescription drugs are the drug of choice among 12- and 13-year olds.
 - New abusers of prescription drugs are now as common as new users of marijuana.
 - Pain relievers like OxyContin and Vicodin are the prescription drugs most commonly abused by teens.
 - One third of all new abusers of prescription drugs in 2005 were 12- to 17-year olds.

“Prescription for Danger: A Report on the Troubling Trend of Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drug Abuse Among the Nation’s Teens”, Office of National Drug Control Policy, Executive Office of the President, January, 2008. Available online at: http://www.theantidrug.com/pdfs/prescription_report.pdf, accessed 11/20/08.
See also: Office of National Drug Control Policy web site > Drug Facts > Prescription Drugs http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/drugfact/prescriptn_drugs/index.html
- Ten percent of 10th graders used opiate pain killers to “get high” in the last 30 days; almost 12 percent of 12th graders used opiate pain killers to “get high” in the last 30 days.

WA Healthy Youth Survey, 2006 Survey Results, RMC Research Corporation. Available online at <https://fortress.wa.gov/doh/hys/Documents/2006CntyReports/CO00Gr10.pdf>
- Emergency department reports indicate that 3,529 visits in 2006 were caused by prescription medications (opiates). Over half of those (54%) were caused by drug abuse.

Banta-Green, C, et al. (2007). The Use & Abuse of Prescription-Type Opiates in Washington State, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Institute, University of Washington. Available online at http://depts.washington.edu/adai/pubs/arb/PrescriptionOpiates_March30_2007.pdf

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Compiled 2/1/09 from literature research conducted by members of the Medicine Return Project in Washington, www.medicinereturn.com.

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