



PIC QUESTION OF THE WEEK: 2/12/07

Q: What is the proper way for patients to dispose of expired or unused medication?

A: At this time, there is no standard method for consumer disposal of expired or unused medication. There are currently several methods by which patients discard prescription and OTC drugs. These include placing drugs in the sink and rinsing with water, flushing them down the toilet, and disposing them in the trash. These methods are problematic because drugs pollute the environment when introduced into the soil and waterways. The effects of drugs on wildlife and other organisms are unknown, but the consequences could be significant. For example, antibiotic medications polluting the environment could contribute to widespread antibiotic resistance. Current treatment systems are not capable of filtering medications during the water purification process. Although there may now be only trace amounts of drugs in the water supply, their continued presence may be cumulative. Recognition of this potential problem has led several states to establish programs for safer disposal of medications. States such as Massachusetts, Maine, Minnesota, Washington, and others allow pharmacies to accept unused or expired medication. The public can return medications to the pharmacy and place them in a depository within the store. The pharmacy is responsible for the necessary arrangements to ensure the medications are disposed as medical waste. In states that do not have medication disposal programs, the best method for discarding expired or unused medications is placement in the trash. Medications are less likely to contaminate the environment when placed in existing landfills than by any other means. When disposing of tablets or capsules in the trash, it is recommended the label be removed and enough water be placed in the bottle to dissolve the medication. Tape should be used to secure the top of the bottle. It should then be placed in another container and disposed in the regular trash. This method prevents children from accidentally ingesting the medication and discourages use by others. When disposing of liquid medications, it is recommended that table salt, flour, charcoal, or non-toxic powdered spices be added to the original container. The proper disposal of expired or unused medication is an emerging concern. Although some states are actively addressing this issue, nationwide attention is necessary to prevent future environmental problems.

References:

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