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Pharmaceuticals in Water

While the presence of pharmaceutical and personal care products (PPCPs) in drinking water has only been widely reported in recent years, residues from these products have probably been in some water supplies for as long as people have been using them. We are only becoming aware of them now due to today's advanced testing capabilities, which are capable of detecting very small traces of many PPCPs in drinking and waste water supplies at the parts-per-trillion (ppt) level.

Sources of PPCPs

Traces of PPCPs can enter our water supplies through several avenues. Not all medicines that we take are entirely absorbed, leaving a portion to be passed out by the body. It is also suspected that some consumers may still be flushing unused medicines down the toilet or disposing of them with their regular trash. The ingredients in personal care products, including deodorant, skin lotions and hair care products, can be washed away when bathing, thus entering wastewater collection systems. At this time, wastewater treatment plants are generally not engineered to remove many of the PPCPs from wastewater.

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and many states are looking into this issue. According to the EPA, preliminary studies have not found any evidence of adverse human health effects from PPCPs at the levels being detected. They are continuing to investigate this issue and are committed to develop strategies to help protect both the environment and public health.

Are Home Water Treatment Units an Option?

NSF International is currently participating in a task force to further investigate the issue of PPCPs in water and whether home water treatment systems might be helpful. While home water treatment systems are not specifically certified to reduce pharmaceuticals at this time, many of these products can help provide additional protection against a wide array of other contaminants, including arsenic, lead and cysts, sometimes found in drinking water.

Never dispose of unused medicines by flushing down the toilet.

What Can You Do Now?

Proper disposal of medicines can help. If you need to dispose of unused medicines, check with your city or county to see if any take-back centers have been set up in your area. You can also check the website http://earth911.com/ to see if there are any recycling centers near your home.

For additional information on home water treatment, please view our drinking water fact kit or contact the NSF Consumer Affairs Office at (888) 99-SAFER or email info@nsf.org.

NSF International is an independent, not-for-profit public health organization that certifies products and writes standards for food, water and consumer goods. NSF has a 65-year history of protecting public health, safety and environment worldwide and is a World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Food and Water Safety and Indoor Environment.