

Trash may be best way to dispose of prescription drugs

By Ted Burnham, NPR

American homes are filled with unused prescription drugs. Each year we squirrel away 200 million pounds of pharmaceuticals we don't need anymore, according to some estimates.

Left in medicine cabinets, those drugs can end up in the hands of children or others who really shouldn't be taking them. Proper and timely disposal can avert those problems. Flushing or trashing drugs has been the norm for decades, but take-back programs have been springing up at pharmacies and police departments lately.

The Drug Enforcement Administration has organized four nationwide take-back events since 2010. The most recent, in late April, collected more than 500,000 pounds of unwanted medications.

Of course, any disposal method has environmental consequences. Flushing, for instance, has fallen out of favor for all but a handful of drugs because of concerns about water contamination. And researchers at the University of Michigan, writing this week in *Environmental Science and Technology*, say they've determined that trashing drugs, paradoxically, may be the most environmentally-friendly option.

"It's surprising to find out that even though there's this push toward take-back, trash seems to be the best option for several different reasons," lead author Sherri Cook, of the University of Michigan department of engineering, tells Shots.

The researchers looked at the overall environmental impact of three disposal methods – flushing, trashing and incineration. They included how much of the drugs would enter the

environment, but also looked at emissions impacts from transportation, water treatment, and burning of waste materials.

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