How to Safely Throw Away Medications

As time passes, medicines may lose their effectiveness, especially if they are stored in a medicine cabinet in a warm, moist bathroom. In rare cases, outdated medicines could become toxic. For example, taking expired tetracycline (an antibiotic) can cause serious kidney problems. On over-the-counter medicines and sample medicines, the expiration date (the date it should be discarded) is often printed on the label under "EXP," or stamped without ink into the bottom of a bottle, carton, or the crimp of a tube. For medicines without an expiration date, unless you know you purchased it within the past year, it's best to toss it.

In the past, most people flushed old medicines down the toilet. This was done to prevent accidental poisonings of children and animals who may find medicines in the trash. But today, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) no longer recommends this. Sewage treatment plants may not be able to clean all medicines out of the water. This may harm fish and wildlife.

The American Pharmacists Association (APhA) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service say just three small steps can make a huge difference:

1. Do not flush in the toilet or pour down the sink.

2. When tossing unused medications in the trash, follow these steps to protect children and animals:
   - Crush solid medications or dissolve them in water (this applies for liquid medications as well) and mix with kitty litter or sawdust (or any material that absorbs the dissolved medication and makes it less appealing for pets or children to eat), then place in a sealed plastic bag BEFORE tossing in the trash.
   - Remove and destroy ALL identifying personal information (prescription label) from the medication container.