

News from the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services



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Opinion/Editorial (580 words)

Test your well water for known health risks

**Tom Burack, New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services
Commissioner**

An alarm was recently sounded by the media, alerting us to the potential dangers related to trace amounts of pharmaceuticals and personal care products (PPCPs) in drinking water. While this announcement is certainly a reason for concern, it is not a reason for panic nor does it represent breaking news to the staff at DES. The attention that this announcement provides is a great reminder that we should all be concerned about the quality of our drinking water, especially if the water is provided by a private well. Although testing for PPCPs in private wells is not generally available, testing for contaminants, such as bacteria, arsenic, radioactivity and components of gasoline for which there are established health based standards, is readily available and affordable.

Over the last two years, DES has collaborated with other New England states, USGS and the EPA to study several aspects of PPCPs through an initiative spearheaded by the New England Interstate Water Pollution Control Commission. We will continue to collect the critical information and data needed before policies and standards on PPCPs are considered. Some of the areas of focus include: 1) occurrence of PPCPs in the environment; 2) the fate and transport of PPCPs in the environment; 3) human and ecological health effects associated with exposure to PPCPs; 4) approaches for managing and disposing of unused PPCPs; 5) effectiveness of wastewater and drinking water treatment technology in removing PPCPs from water; and 6) the viability of employing "green chemistry" techniques and life cycle analyses to develop PPCPs in the future that will not persist in the environment.

While the state and federal governments conduct the needed research to develop appropriate policies to manage PPCPs in drinking water, we should be conscious of the fact that all of us are responsible for them getting into the drinking water. Whether it is prescription drugs, over-the-counter medications, make-up, soap or sunscreen, some of it goes down the drain and, unless treated, out into the environment. Published research has identified select instances where compounds from PPCPs in water have likely impacts on ecological health. DES strongly supports studies by federal agencies and other national organizations to further evaluate the relationship between the occurrence of PPCPs at trace levels in the environment and human and ecological health impacts.

The reality of the situation is that we can no longer have the attitude of "flush it and forget it." DES has developed a fact sheet that provides guidance on the proper disposal methods for unwanted medicines (www.des.nh.gov/factsheets/sw/sw-33.htm). Your medicine should never

be disposed of in a wastewater system unless the label specifically states to do so. DES is studying unused medicine disposal practices in New Hampshire and will make recommendations on new outreach initiatives or programs that may be implemented to improve our management of these materials.

Finally, there are naturally occurring contaminants in the environment that are known to have impacts on health. Proper siting and construction of wells are paramount to prevent contamination from having impacts on a groundwater drinking water source. Protecting water resources by properly managing substances that can contaminate water is another important measure that needs to be consistently implemented. Although DES requires regular testing of public water sources to ensure drinking water meets current water quality standards, there is no such requirement for private well owners. Accordingly, DES strongly encourages homeowners to have water quality tests completed on a regular basis. To learn more about testing your well, please visit www.des.nh.gov/pdf/well_testing.pdf.

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