

Pills and their ills

You may try sucking herbal lozenges when you're ill, but as soon as you feel really sick, you're off to the nearest doctor to get a prescription. And a few pills later, you feel better, the tablet box is thrown away (hopefully in the recycle bin), and you forget about it till the next time illness strikes. Sounds familiar?

US health spending will constitute 18.7 percent of the gross domestic product by 2014, up from 15.3 percent in 2003, according to estimates by financial experts from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS).

In Canada, total health care spending in 2005 exceeded \$4,400 per person or over 10% of gross domestic product (National Health Expenditure Trends, 1975-2005). Canada's health care spending continues to rise and reached \$160.1 billion dollars in 2007, up from \$150.3 billion in 2006.

But what happens to all those pills we pop, and how exactly do they affect the environment? Along with producing synthetic pills by the billions each year, by-products in terms of vast amounts of pollutants are also produced. Many of the chemical solvents released are considered hazardous and can't be treated by wastewater treatment plants. In addition to this, pharmaceutical plants also produce toxic particles which are released into the atmosphere, including cyanide and neuro-toxin toluene.

Sewage treatment plants degrade most drug residues that come out of our system, but a lot pass through the treatment facilities unchanged. Drug residues then end up flowing into our rivers and oceans and sometimes, pouring back out of our taps! Overall, roughly 100 pharmaceuticals have been found in the waters of Europe and the US, and while this may be a small drop in the ocean so to speak, it can have a larger effect on marine life.

However, the good news is that something can be done about it. If you do have expired drugs, then take them back to your pharmacy and ask them if they have a drug disposal programme. Do not throw them into bins, your recycle box or flush them down the toilet. If your pharmacy doesn't have a programme, your municipality should be able to direct you to one that does.

In addition, switch to natural, gentler remedies for everyday illnesses. Remember what your mother and grandmother did when you were ill? Maybe brewed you some nice camomile tea and made a hot cup of chicken soup? And put a few drops of eucalyptus or tea tree oil on your pillow? They made you poultices when you sprained your ankle, and used menthol to ease your head-aches. There are a number of healthy alternatives to popping a pill. Give them a try and see if they work for you!