Hazardous Materials Safety Tips

ARE YOU POISONING YOUR WATER

If someone were to drop a poisonous substance into your community's water supply, the act would be considered a serious crime and a state of public emergency would be declared.

But when you dump a can of paint thinner down the drain or throw out an old car battery with the trash, no alarms are sounded, no news flashes are issued. Yet, the impact on your water resources could be just as disastrous.

That is not a far-fetched statement. The average household contains between three and ten gallons of materials that are hazardous to human health or to the natural environment. Collectively, these materials can poison our water if they are not stored carefully and disposed of properly.

Hazardous Materials & Dangers

HAZARDOUS MATERIALS

The United States Environmental Protection Agency considers a substance hazardous if it can catch fire, if it can react or explode when mixed with other substances, if it is corrosive, or if it is toxic.

This definition includes many things that you probably are storing right now in your garage, basement, bathroom, or kitchen. Some, like paint thinner or car batteries, are pretty obvious, but there are many that you might not ordinarily think of such as polishes, insecticides and glues.

HAZARDOUS WASTE DANGERS

The improper disposal of household wastes can cause problems for the entire community. Wastes can be explosives or highly flammable. Sewers have exploded and garbage trucks have burned because people have carelessly discarded flammable or reactive wastes.

Hazardous wastes can also be corrosive. The acid from discarded auto batteries can eat away many substances. Some wastes are poisonous to humans or wildlife, while others can cause cancer, birth defects or other serious medical problems.

For more information on the safest way to dispose of these and other products contact your state's solid and hazardous waste department or the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

Source: Water Environment Federation

Hazardous Material Disposal

One of the worst ways to dispose of many hazardous materials is to "just dump them down the drain." Wastewater treatment plants are not designed to handle certain types of hazardous wastes.

Unfortunately, disposing of wastes in a landfill has not proven an effective solution either. Without special design, the modern sanitary landfill is not equipped to accept hazardous wastes. Hazardous wastes improperly disposed of in a landfill can pollute the environment through the groundwater, surface water and air.

If the public cannot dispose of most hazardous wastes in the sewer system or a landfill, what can be done? These household tips indicate the best way of dealing with most hazardous materials found with in the home.

FIRST: THINK LESS IS BEST!

You need not have a Ph.D. in chemistry to reduce the use of hazardous wastes in your home. The following suggestions can help anyone:

- Before you buy a product, read the label and make sure that it will do what you want. Once you buy something you are also responsible for disposing of it properly.
- Do not buy more than you need. That way, you will not need to dispose of the surplus.
- Read and follow directions on how to use a product and dispose of the container. **(There is a good reason why the labels say "do not incinerate" or "do not mix with bleach.")**
- Use safer substitutes when they are available.

SECOND: TAKE CARE OF THE WASTES

Even if you reduce the wastes that must be dealt with as outlined above there is still the question of what to do with what is left over.

Recycling is an excellent way of handling some hazardous wastes. Used motor oil, paint thinners and some other solvents can be refined and reused just as aluminum cans are. Local civic groups can help you identify recycling programs.

Municipal or commercial incineration is another effective means of dealing with some hazardous wastes. However, a specially designed incinerator is needed to destroy hazardous materials. "**Incinerators" in your home, such as your fireplace or woodstove, can not get hot enough to destroy hazardous wastes and should never be used to destroy wastes.**"

Take your household hazardous wastes to a licensed contractor or recycling agency which may be located through the yellow pages. If such a group does not exist, your local wastewater treatment operator can give you more information on the disposal of liquid waste. Your local sanitation department may be able to give you more information on the disposal of solid wastes.

The **Household Hazardous Waste Chart** will guide you in disposing of potentially hazardous materials around your home. You should display this chart in a convenient location.

Remember to never dump hazardous wastes on the ground, and always check the chart before pouring them down the drain.

Source: Water Environment Federation

Hazardous Material Household Tips

The following chart prepared by the Water Pollution Control Federation will help you establish the most effective means of disposing of typical hazardous wastes used around your home or garden.

BLUE DOTS
Indicate products which can be poured down the drain with plenty of water. If you have a septic tank, additional caution should be exercise when dumping these items down the drain. In fact, there are certain chemical substances that cannot be used with a septic tank. Read the labels to determine if a product could damage the septic tank.

YELLOW DIAMOND
Indicate materials which cannot be poured down the drain, but can be safely disposed of in a sanitary landfill. Be certain the material is properly contained before it is put out for collection or carried to the landfill.

RED BOX
Indicate hazardous wastes which should be saved for a community wide collection day or given to a licensed hazardous wastes contractor. (Even the empty containers should be taken to a licensed contractor if one is available.)

GREEN PACKAGES

Indicate recyclable material. If there is a recycling program in your area, take the materials there. If not, encourage local officials to start such program.

For more information on the safest way to dispose of these and other products contact your state's solid and hazardous waste department or the United States Environmental Protection Agency.