WHAT YOU CAN DO cont’d

your provincial Ministers of the Environment and Health and the manufacturer of any drugs you take regularly. Urge them to collaborate on a take-back and safe-disposal program.

■ Call your public works department and ask if your municipality includes discarded pharmaceuticals in its household hazardous waste program. Question Environment Canada, Health Canada and your provincial Ministries of the Environment and Health about why more stringent precautions for disposal are not in place.

■ Contact Janssen-Ortho, the Canadian manufacturer of the patch Evra, (Tel: 1-866-848-3872) and insist that the product be labelled with instructions to return used patches to a pharmacy for disposal.

■ Contact Health Canada’s Environmental Impact Initiative (Tel: 1-888-492-1104 or e-mail ear-ree@hc-sc.gc.ca) and the manufacturers of drugs you use to insist on federally mandated drug labelling that tells consumers how to dispose of unused drugs. Demand action on proposed regulations to eliminate PPCPs with potentially harmful ingredients that contaminate the environment. Demand immediate labelling as an interim measure.

■ Contact pharmaceutical industry groups (www.canadapharma.org, e-mail info@canadapharma.org and www.cdna-acfpp.org/en/about.html, e-mail info@canadiangenerics.ca) and individual manufacturers to protest ads that promote prescription drugs. Such ads are illegal in Canada, but the ban is not adequately enforced. Tell them you want unbiased information about prescription drugs from an independent source.

■ For collective action, support a group that recognizes the links between health and the environment, such as Women’s Healthy Environments Network, The Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care, Health Care Without Harm, Stop Cancer.org., Alliance for a Healthy Tomorrow or The Campaign for Safe Cosmetics.

F OR M ORE I NFORMATION...

For a detailed report on PPCPs, see Full Circle: Prescription Drugs, the Environment and Our Health, written by Sharon Batt, on the website of Women and Health Protection, at www.whp-apsf.ca

For more detail on current government regulations and their impact on environmental protection, see “Evra and the Environment” at www.whp-apsf.ca

Health Canada’s Environmental Impact Initiative, including the proposed environmental assessment regulations, is online at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ear-ree/index_e.html

Written by Sharon Batt in collaboration with Women and Health Protection

What About Those “Convenient” Patches and Rings?

Contraceptive hormonal patches, manufactured by Janssen-Ortho under the brand name Evra, have been promoted for their convenience. But the used patches contain large amounts of a persistent, synthetic hormone that can feminize male fish. Instructions say to fold them in half and discard in the garbage after use, but the hormone can still leach into the environment. Dr. Joakim Larsson, a Swedish endocrinologist who has researched the patches, questions whether they should be sold at all since birth control pills are more environmentally friendly. A new product making its appearance on the Canadian market is the NuvaRing, a contraceptive ring manufactured by Organon. The ring, on disposal, contains 1/3 more estrogen than a month’s worth of discarded patches, and up to 6 times as much hormone as a month’s supply of birth control pills. The Canadian drug approval process has, to date, included no review of safe disposal requirements and no environmental impact assessment component. Proposed new regulations are still several years from becoming law and current regulations do not deal adequately with pharmaceutical products. Pharmaceutical companies appear to adjust their practices, and information to consumers, according to the regulations in each country. If Canada’s regulations are less demanding than those of the US and Europe, manufacturers may well apply lower standards in the Canadian market.
WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you eat meat, eat organic to reduce environmental impact. Only purchase cosmetics that are free of phthalates and other PPCPs. Never dispose of unused and expired medications. If your province does not have an organized medications take-back program, contact the provincial pharmacy regulatory agency, the provincial medical association, or their own printed matter and verbally, about proper disposal of unused drugs. Women also experience adverse reactions to drugs more often than men. This difference is only in part because women use more drugs than men. A US government report concludes that physiological differences, such as smaller average body size and differences in metabolism, may make women more susceptible than men to drug-related health risks.

An Ounce of Prevention …

History shows we need to pay attention to early warning signs if we are to prevent problems to our health and the environment. This is the basis for a policy approach called the “precautionary principle.” When we suspect harm is being done but the scientific evidence is still not conclusive, the precautionary principle directs us to act to prevent the possible harm. Marine life deformities tell us PPCPs have already affected the ecosystem on which we depend. We need to act now, to reverse these problems and to prevent others. Prevention should be our first line of defence against PPCPs. We can begin immediately with programs to reduce over-use and inappropriate use of pharmaceuticals and other PPCPs and by disposing safely of unused products. These precautions are more economical and ecological than trying to extract PPCPs from the water after the fact. Improved municipal filter systems and redesigned products, while necessary, are long-term, costly approaches. Is the Government Protecting Us?
The Canadian government has begun to look at the problem of PPCPs under a program called the Environmental Impact Initiative. This program includes research, public education, and the introduction of environmental assessment regulations (EAR). But the development of regulations is proceeding at a snail’s pace and new regulatory requirements are unlikely to take effect for several years. In addition to speeding up the enactment of regulations, Women and Health Protection believes the federal government should broaden its program from narrow risk assessment to a holistic “green pharmacy” approach. This would include an emphasis on prevention, through reduced use of drugs and other PPCPs. Drug use can be reduced by promoting better nutrition for disease prevention, increasing the use of non-polluting complementary and alternative approaches to treatment, enforcing Canada’s ban on prescription drug advertising, and providing unbiased, publicly funded information on prescription drugs. We have also urged the government to recognize the role of gender in its policy approaches (see “Women and PPCPs,” below).

At the moment, only British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan have comprehensive programs that encourage consumers to return unused drugs to pharmacies. Other provinces should follow suit. The National Association of Pharmacy Regulatory Authorities (NAPRA) has shown leadership on this issue, but in order to succeed, programs need support from industry groups, medical associations and federal and provincial governments.

Women and PPCPs

Women have a particularly strong connection to PPCPs. Because of cultural influences, women are the family members most often responsible for health, including the purchase of drugs and food, food preparation, family hygiene, care of sick family members and disposal of home-use products. A survey of Canadians found more women than men flushed unwanted drugs down the toilet or sink. This probably reflects the responsibility women take for children’s safety in the home, rather than a disregard for the environment. In fact, the same survey found that more women than men are interested in learning how to dispose of drugs safely and are willing to go out of their way to do so. Many drugs are prescribed more often to women than to men (e.g., anti-depressants); others are gender-specific (e.g., birth control pills, menopausal hormone therapy). Drug company ad campaigns often target women to expand the use of existing drugs, as in the promotion of anti-depressants for “mood disorders.” Women are the main users of cosmetics, perfumes and hair products. Synthetic musk fragrances from perfumes and other toiletries have been detected in drinking water. So have phthalates, a family of industrial chemicals used in cosmetics and linked in animal studies to permanent birth defects in the male reproductive system. Biologically, women have different life cycle vulnerabilities to chemicals than men. Pregnancy is the most obvious example. A woman’s exposure to minute quantities of certain chemicals while she is pregnant can harm the developing fetus. Such exposure at a critical time in the fetal growth cycle can cause deformities, cancer or subtle effects on a child’s ability to learn. Some health specialists believe no dose of synthetic hormones is safe for the developing embryo and fetus.

Women also experience adverse reactions to drugs more often than men. This difference is only in part because women use more drugs than men. A US government report concludes that physiological differences, such as smaller average body size and differences in metabolism, may make women more susceptible than men to some drug-related health risks.