



LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY Health Department

1930 Ninth Avenue
Helena, MT 59601
PH: 406.4HEALTH or 406.443.2584
Fax: 406.457.8990

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Contact: Melanie Reynolds, Health Officer, 406-457-8910

Gayle Shirley, Communications Coordinator, 406-457-8908

Only Rain Belongs Down Storm Drain

By Melanie Reynolds

Would you get rid of old motor oil by dissolving it in your drinking water? Of course not! It's hazardous to your health!

And yet, many people essentially do just that when they dispose of motor oil and other contaminants by tossing them down the storm drain at their curb.

Unlike the water we use in our sink or flush down our toilet, water that enters Helena storm-water collection systems is not treated. It flows directly into the water bodies we use for swimming, fishing, and, yes, drinking. This type of contamination is called storm-water pollution.

When it rains, or when snow melts, runoff usually soaks into the ground, which helps to filter out pollutants. But solid surfaces – like driveways, sidewalks, and streets – channel runoff into gutters and storm drains. Along the way, the storm water can pick up all kinds of nasty things, including:

- Oil, grease, metals, and coolants from vehicles;
- Fertilizers, pesticides and other chemicals from gardens and homes;
- Bacteria from pet waste and failing septic systems;
- Soil from construction sites and other bare ground;
- Debris, like cigarette butts, plastic bags, and six-pack rings;
- Soap from washing cars or other equipment, and
- Accidental spills, leaky storage containers, tobacco spit, and whatever else ends up on the ground.

What happens when these pollutants reach Tenmile or Prickly Pear Creeks, Lake Helena, or the Helena Valley aquifer? They can harm the health of plants, fish, animals, and people.

Fortunately, this is a problem we can all help to solve. Here are some ways you can help to prevent storm-water pollution:

Lawn Care

*The mission of the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department
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Fertilizers and pesticides that wash off lawns and into storm drains eventually pollute the very sources we get our drinking water from. Yard clippings and leaves can also contribute nutrients and organic matter to streams, causing algae blooms and lowering oxygen levels that fish need to survive. And people can get sick from eating diseased fish.

- Don't overwater your yard. Consider using a soaker hose or drip system instead of sprinklers.
- Use pesticides and fertilizers sparingly. Use organic alternatives or safer pest-control methods whenever possible. Don't fertilize if heavy rain is expected.
- Don't sweep grass clippings or other yard waste into gutters or storm drains. Compost them instead, or use a mulching mower.
- Replace all or part of your lawn with native, drought-resistant plants.

Landscape Care

- Reduce the solid surfaces around your home (like your concrete or asphalt driveway or patio) and consider using permeable materials, like gravel or brick pavers, that allow water to filter through.
- Collect rainwater from rooftops in mosquito-proof rain barrels. Use the water on your lawn and garden.
- Care for existing trees or plant new ones. They hold rainfall and help manage storm water.
- Don't drain your pool, spa, or outdoor fountain into a storm drain.
- Cover piles of dirt or mulch from landscaping projects, to keep rain from washing them into gutters.
- Don't litter. Be a good neighbor and help pick up wind-blown trash and debris.

Auto Care

Washing your car and dumping automotive fluids into streets, alleys, yards, or storm drains has the same effect as dumping them directly into a lake or stream.

- Use a commercial car wash that treats or recycles its wastewater.
- If you wash your car at home, do it on your lawn or a gravel surface, rather than on the street or in your driveway. Use biodegradable or non-toxic soaps that are phosphate-free.
- Fix leaks and dispose of used oil, antifreeze, and other fluids and batteries at designated drop-off or recycling sites. You can dispose of used motor oil at the Helena Transfer Station.

Animal Care

Animal waste can be a major source of bacteria and excess nutrients in local waterways and a risk to public health.

- Pick up pet waste and dispose of it by bagging it and throwing it in the trash.
- Keep animals out of streams. Use fencing if necessary.
- Compost manure in an area where it can't wash into nearby water bodies.

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Household Care

Leaking and poorly maintained septic systems release pollutants that can be picked up by storm water and washed into nearby water bodies. Flushing items down the sewer system also lead to potential water-quality problems. Treating them costs more.

- Don't dispose of household hazardous waste in sinks or toilets.
- Use natural or less toxic household alternatives when possible.
- Dispose of waste liquids like paint by recycling them or solidifying them in sand or dirt and sending them to a landfill.
- Inspect your septic system regularly, and pump your tank every 3-5 years. The health department's Septic Maintenance Program can help you keep your septic system working properly.

For more information:

- Lewis and Clark City-County Septic Maintenance Program, 447-8385
- Water Quality Protection District, 457-8927
- City of Helena Utility Maintenance Division, 457-8567
- EPA, <http://water.epa.gov/action/weatherchannel/stormwater.cfm>

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