



Safely Disposing of Your Medications at Home

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Are your medication cabinets at home filled with unused, unwanted or expired medications? How should you dispose of them safely without putting your family and others at risk, or harming the environment?

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently updated its Consumer Health Information guide that outlines how to safely dispose of unused medications. Most medications can be thrown in your household trash; however, consumers need to take certain precautions before throwing them out.

There are also a few medications that should be disposed of by flushing them down the toilet, and community take-back programs are available in most areas, providing a safe alternative to home disposal.

What Are the Safe Disposal Guidelines?

The FDA first worked with the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) in February 2007 to establish consumer guidelines on the proper disposal of medications. These guidelines were updated in October 2009, then again in

April 2011. A federal guideline summary is included below.

- Follow any specific disposal instructions on the medication label or patient information that accompanies the medication. Do not flush prescription medications down the toilet unless this information specifically instructs you to do so.

- Take advantage of community medication take-back programs that allow the public to bring unused medications to a central location for proper disposal. Call your city or county government’s household trash and recycling service (see blue pages in phone book) to see if a take-back program is available in your community. The Drug Enforcement Administration, working with state and local law enforcement agencies, is also sponsoring National Prescription Drug Take-Back Days throughout the United States.
- If no instructions are given on the medication label and no take-back program is available in your area, throw the medications in with your household trash, but first:
 - Take them out of their original containers and mix them with an undesirable substance, such as used coffee grounds or kitty litter. The medication will be less appealing to children and pets, and unrecognizable to people who may intentionally go through your trash.
 - Put them in a sealable bag, empty can or other container to prevent the medication from leaking or breaking out of a garbage bag.

The FDA Deputy Director of the Office of Compliance Ilisa Bernstein, Pharm.D., J.D., also offers some additional tips:

- Before throwing out a medicine container, scratch out all identifying information on the prescription label to make it unreadable. This will help protect your identity and the privacy of your personal health information.
- Do not give medications to friends. Doctors prescribe medications based on a person’s specific symptoms and medical history. A drug that works for you could be dangerous for someone else.
- **When in doubt about proper disposal, talk to your pharmacist.**
- The same disposal methods for prescription medications could apply to over-the-counter medications as well.

Why Should I Take Precautions?

Disposal instructions included on a medication label are developed by the FDA in collaboration with the medication’s manufacturer. These guidelines are the most appropriate route of disposal that presents the least safety risks.

Some medications, including powerful narcotic pain relievers and other controlled substances, contain instructions for flushing to reduce the chance for accidental use, overdose or illegal use. For example, the fentanyl patch, an adhesive patch that delivers a potent pain medicine through the skin, comes with instructions to flush used or leftover patches. Too much fentanyl can cause severe breathing problems and lead to death in babies, children, pets and even adults, especially those who have not been prescribed the medication.

Despite the safety reasons for flushing medications, some people are questioning the practice because of concerns about trace levels of medication residues found in surface water, such

as rivers and lakes, and in some community drinking water supplies. However, the main way medication residues enter water systems is by people taking medications and then naturally passing them through their bodies, according to Raanan Bloom, Ph.D., an environmental assessment expert in FDA’s Center for Drug Evaluation and Research.

The agency reviewed its medication labels to identify products with disposal directions recommending flushing or disposal down the sink. This continuously revised listing can be found on the FDA’s Web site page on the Disposal of Unused Medicines.

References

- U.S. Food and Drug Administration, www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm101653.htm, June 3, 2011.

Medication Disposal Resources and Michigan Take-Back Programs

Follow the links below to access additional resources on safe medication disposal.

- FDA Consumer Health Information Guide: How to Dispose of Unused Medications
- Disposal of Unused Medicines: What You Should Know
- List of Medicines Recommended for Disposal by Flushing
- Medication Disposal: Questions and Answers
- National Take-Back Initiative: Find a Collection Site Near You
- Federal Guidelines for Proper Disposal of Drugs

In addition, there are a number of programs available in Michigan that allow the public to safely dispose of medications. Utilize the links below for more information on safe medication disposal initiatives in the state.

- Calhoun County Medicine Prevention Task Force
- Dispose My Meds
- Eaton County Resource Recovery Events
- Great Lakes Clean Water Organization: Yellow Jug Old Drugs
- Macomb County Public Health Medication Disposal Collection
- Michigan Department of Environmental Quality
- Muskegon Area Medication Disposal Program
- Pharmaceutical Take-Back Program, Washtenaw County
- State of Michigan Recycling and Household Hazardous Waste County Contacts
- West Michigan Take Back Meds

For more information, ask your pharmacist!

This information is provided by Michigan Pharmacists Association and:

