



How to safely dispose of leftover prescription medication

Many households have prescription drugs that are expired or unused. These drugs, especially opioid painkillers, can be dangerous and need to be disposed of promptly and properly.

Why you shouldn't keep unused prescription drugs

- **Poisoning Risks:** Children or pets may be accidentally poisoned by swallowing medicine. One study reported that nearly 248,000 children visiting emergency rooms between 2001 and 2008 had been accidentally poisoned by ingesting prescription medications.¹ In 2011, prescription human medications were the number one cause of pet poisoning.² Cardiac and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder medications were the most prevalent.
- **Availability:** Family members, friends or other visitors to your home may take your drugs for their own use or sell them if they are accessible. More than 70% of people who abuse prescription painkillers obtained them from family or friends, with or without permission.³
- **Medication Shelf-Life and Misuse:** Some medicines degrade over time and some can become ineffective. Antibiotics should never be taken without a doctor's permission as they can make your infection antibiotic-resistant and hard to treat.
- **Dangers of Self-Medicating:** Self-medicating by taking someone else's medicine or your own unused medicine may lead to misread symptoms and potentially delayed treatment of a serious medical problem. Some medications also have dangerous interactions with each other and with foods that may not be noted on the label. Doctors look at medical history, symptoms and interactions before prescribing drugs.
- **Suicide Attempts:** Sometimes people attempt suicide by swallowing whatever is in the medicine cabinet. Prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications accounted for 94% of emergency room visits related to suicide attempts in 2009.⁴

How to safely dispose of your leftover drugs

Most prescriptions should not be flushed down the toilet or poured in a drain because they can pollute water supplies. In some states, it is illegal to flush any medications.

Your community may have a drug take-back program. Take-back programs and events allow the public to bring unused drugs to a central location for proper disposal. In addition to take-back programs, many pharmacies offer mail-back programs where you can pick up a drug disposal envelope at their nearest store. Most pharmacies charge a small fee for a postage paid envelope.

If your community does not offer a drug take-back or mail-back program, you can visit nsc.org/disposalresources to learn how to safely dispose of unused medications.

Leftover, unused or old medication is dangerous to keep in your home. It is important for you to know how to properly dispose of it.

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¹ Bond GR, Woodward RW, Ho M. "The Growing Impact of Pediatric Pharmaceutical Poisoning." *Journal of Pediatrics*. Vol. 160, Issue 2, Pages 265-270, February 2012

² American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Top 10 Pet Toxins of 2011. 2012. <http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/poison-control/top-10-pet-poisons-of-the-year.aspx>

³ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, (2012) Results from The 2011 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Summary of National Findings (NSDUH Series H-44, HHS Publication No. (SMA) 12-4713). Rockville, MD. Retrieved from <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/nsduh/2k11results/nsduhresults2011.htm>

⁴ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Drug Abuse Warning Network, 2009: National Estimates of Drug-Related Emergency Department Visits. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 11-4659, DAWN Series D-35. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2011.