

## After the medicine cabinet

Why proper disposal of unused medications is so important



# Health risks linked to unused prescription medications

The risks linked to unused prescription medications are real and alarming. When used improperly or accidentally ingested, they can create health hazards for adults, teens, young children, and pets. When disposed of improperly, they can have negative impacts on natural resources and the environment.

## Medication misuse

A past National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) reported that more than 15 million people aged 12 or older had used prescription medications non-medically in the previous year. Although more recent surveys show declines in certain categories, non-medical prescription drug use — particularly involving opioids, sedatives, and stimulants — is still a significant concern.<sup>1,2</sup>

Among adolescents and young adults, access to unsafe prescription medications often begins closer to home than parents realize.

*One in four teens* reports having abused a prescription pain reliever at least once<sup>3</sup>

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*14% of teens* reported misusing prescription opioids<sup>4</sup>

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*Most teens who misuse prescription drugs obtain them from a family member or friend,* often from a household medicine cabinet

These findings have stayed consistent across multiple studies and surveys conducted over the past decade, underscoring the importance of securing and properly disposing of medications once they are no longer needed.

## Accidental poisonings

Improper medication storage and disposal not only contribute to intentional misuse; they also play a key role in unintentional poisonings, particularly among young children.

The American Association of Poison Control Centers (AAPCC) continues to report millions of calls annually related to misuse of prescription medications. Children are naturally curious, and medications that are not in secure packaging or properly discarded can be mistaken for candy or food. Pain medications — both prescription and over the counter — are the substances most often involved in human exposure cases, especially for children under age six.<sup>5</sup>



Even small amounts of certain medications can cause *severe injury or death* when ingested by a child.

## Harm to pets

The dangers of unsecured medications extend beyond humans. Pets are also frequent victims of accidental medication exposure.

Dogs, in particular, are vulnerable to ingesting discarded pills, transdermal patches, or flavored medications intended for humans. Commonly implicated drugs include pain medications, antidepressants, and heart medications — many of which can be fatal to animals even in small doses.<sup>6</sup>

Improper disposal methods, such as tossing pills into open trash bins or leaving them on countertops, increase the likelihood of pet exposure. Safe disposal of prescription medications is a critical element of responsible pet ownership.

The ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center reports that pet ingestion of medications accounts for the majority of calls received each year.





## **Water contamination**

It is important to permanently remove unused medications from environments where they could be misused or accidentally ingested. But it is also important to do this according to manufacturer's instructions and regulatory guidance. Medications that are disposed of carelessly can affect the environment. Studies have detected trace pharmaceutical compounds in surface water, groundwater, and even drinking water supplies.<sup>7</sup>

# Responsible disposal methods for unused prescription medications

Medication take back and disposal programs are designed to be easy to use and convenient, making safe disposal simple and accessible for people of all ages and abilities.

## National Prescription Drug Take Back Day

National Prescription Drug Take Back Day occurs two times per year, usually in April and October, and offers individuals and families across the United States an important opportunity to take a proactive step toward public health and safety. On these nationwide days of action, communities come together to safely dispose of unused, unwanted, or expired medications that, if left unsecured, can create serious risks to children, teens, pets, and adults alike.

National Prescription Drug Take Back Day provides:

- A safe, anonymous disposal option
- Protection against misuse and accidental poisoning
- A chance to educate families about medication safety
- A tangible way for individuals to support community well being

Visit the [National Prescription Drug Take Back Day](#) web page for more information and collection locations.

This national event is coordinated by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in partnership with state and local law enforcement agencies, pharmacies, and community organizations. Since its start in 2010, the program has removed millions of pounds of medications from circulation, helping reduce diversion and environmental contamination while raising awareness about safe disposal practices.<sup>8</sup>

***This national initiative matters more now than ever.*** The opioid epidemic, ongoing mental health challenges, and increased prescribing during and after the COVID 19 pandemic have contributed to higher volumes of medications in circulation. Even when prescriptions are used appropriately, leftover medication is common due to changes in treatment plans, side effects, or recovery timelines.

## **Year-round community medication take-back programs**

In addition to the national event, many communities offer year round Authorized Collector sites, including:

- Retail pharmacies
- Hospital or clinic pharmacies
- Law enforcement agencies
- Municipal waste facilities

The DEA Office of Diversion Control's Registration Call Center can help locate the nearest authorized collection site at 1-800-882-9539, or individuals can search by ZIP code using the search tool available at this [link](#).

Prepaid drug mail-back envelopes are another convenient and secure disposal option. These envelopes are sold at various places, including retail pharmacies and online. Some pharmacies offer them at no cost.

## **Safe disposal at home**

If a take back program is not available, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommend an at home disposal method that reduces the risk of diversion and accidental exposure.<sup>9</sup>

While most medications should not be flushed, the FDA maintains a specific list of medications that may be especially dangerous if accidentally ingested and, therefore, should be flushed when no take back option is readily available.



These include certain opioid pain medications, such as fentanyl and morphine products, which pose a considerable risk of fatal overdose from a single exposure. The [FDA Flush List](#) is continually reviewed and updated based on safety data and risk benefit analysis.

If the medication is not on the flush list, use the following steps to dispose of the medication:

1. Remove the medication from its original container
2. Mix the medication with an undesirable substance, such as:
  - Used coffee grounds
  - Kitty litter
  - Dirt or food waste
3. Place the mixture in a sealable container or bag to prevent leakage
4. Scratch out all personal information on the prescription label before discarding the original container

This approach makes medications less appealing to children, pets, and individuals seeking drugs in household trash, while also protecting personal health information.<sup>10</sup>



# Protecting lives and creating a cleaner world

Proper disposal of unused, unneeded, or expired medications is a simple but powerful act. It reduces opportunities for drug misuse, protects children from accidental ingestion, keeps pets safe from poisoning, and supports environmental stewardship.

Every day throughout the year, and especially before each National Prescription Drug Take Back Day, individuals, families, employers, and community organizations are encouraged to:

- Talk with children and teens about prescription drug safety
- Clean out medicine cabinets
- Share information about take back locations
- Model responsible medication use and disposal

Every bottle of unneeded medication removed properly from a medicine cabinet reduces risk. Your actions can make your home safer and your community healthier.



## Sources

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