



THE FAMILY PHARMACIST

A QUICK READ FOR YOUR OTC NEED!

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HOW TO TOSS THOSE OLD DRUGS!

Growing up as a kid in St. Louis, I delivered prescriptions on a bike for one of the few pharmacies in the Walnut Park neighborhood. Back in 1961 the pharmacy owner would send me out with enough money to make change for a \$10 bill for each customer's prescription. A prescription back then seldom cost more than \$10. The average prescription cost in 1961 was around \$5 dollars. In that year, American pharmacies filled 219 million outpatient prescriptions for patients, an average of 1.2 prescriptions per person annually.

By the turn of the century, Y2K, the number of outpatient prescriptions filled had risen to 2.1 billion, 7 prescriptions per person each year.

In 2022, 6.7 billion prescriptions were filled by pharmacies in the U.S! By this time, the rules for what a prescription is had changed, and it's difficult to compare "apples to apples" when comparing the number of prescriptions filled per person in 2022 to previous decades. Estimates are that, *on average*, 11 prescriptions per person are filled every year in the U.S. This includes one-time fills and drugs prescribed for chronic conditions (those filled on a continuous basis throughout the year).

This trend has been described by health care professionals as *polypharmacy*, and has become commonplace in the U.S. Polypharmacy refers to the use of five or more medications by the same person at the same time. It's more common in older adults because they have more chronic conditions. However, the use of many prescription drugs at the same time is something that occurs in all age groups.

The question is, are people really taking all these medications? The answer is no!

The Problem. Aside from the fact that prescribing lots of drugs at the same time is not always a good idea, there are several reasons why patients don't take all of the medicine prescribed for them. An antibiotic may be prescribed for seven or ten days, but the patient feels better after just a few days and stops

taking the drug. One study showed that about one-third of patients did not complete their course of antibiotic according to a physician's direction. This is also true with other medicines. Or, your doctor may change the dose of your medication or switch you to another drug entirely. What do you do with the old medicine? Several studies have shown that over half of elderly patients do not take their drugs as prescribed. Once they're expired, it's into the trash they go!

The Risks. Unused, leftover, and expired medicines pose a human healthcare problem, jeopardize the safety of small children and pets, put the environment at risk, and cost all of us billions of dollars every year.

So, how do you get rid of these leftover drugs while also doing the right thing? Popular magazine articles have at times advised people to discard old medicines in the trash or flush them down the toilet. But is this safe and ecologically the right way to do it? Pharmaceuticals have been detected in surface waters, ground water, and treated drinking water in the U.S.

The Solution. Here are a few tips to help you with safe drug disposal:

- * Get rid of old medications immediately. Don't be tempted to keep old medicine around "just in case."
- * Some police stations have locked receptacles at drop-off locations where you can safely deposit old drugs year-round. This is true in my municipality. Check with your local law enforcement.
- * The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) sponsors a drop-off locations website. And every year, either in April or October, the DEA sponsors a National Drug Take Back Day. The next ones in 2026 are expected on the last Saturday of April and October, following the pattern of previous years, with the April date likely around April 25th, 2026, and the October date around October 24th or 25th, 2026

- * Type safe drug disposal in a search engine like Google Chrome or search for it on a cellphone map app to see what's available in your area.
- * For *opioids*, starting in 2025, the FDA's REMS (Risk Evaluation and Mitigation Strategy) program requires manufacturers to provide free, pre-paid drug mail-back envelopes upon request to pharmacies and other dispensers to help patients safely dispose of unused opioids. Take advantage of this program by asking your pharmacist.
- * Some meds can still be flushed down the sink or toilet, but check the FDA's "flush list" for which medicines. Only 13 drugs are on the list and most of these are opioids. This is because the risk of lethal accidental ingestion or abuse is greater than the environmental impact of flushing.
- * To dispose of used needles, auto-injectors, etc., place them in a puncture-resistant, leakproof, thick plastic container (empty laundry bottle, etc.) and duct tape around the lid to prevent leakage. Check out the [safenedisposal.org website](https://www.fda.gov/oc/ohrt/safenedisposal.org) for state rules and locations of sharps (needles, injectors) disposal.
- * Medicines can still be thrown in the trash (as a last resort, and if no other disposal options are available) if they are removed from original containers and mixed with an unappealing substance (cat litter, coffee grounds, etc.) and contained in a sealed bag.
- * Inhalers, aerosols, and chemo drugs may need to be disposed of differently. Chemo (cytotoxic) drugs may be accepted by the clinic that prescribed them or the National Drug Take Back Day event.

So, take time to make your home and community safer. Clean out your medicine stash of unused, left-over and expired medicines. Also, remember to *remove your personal health information before disposal.* Your kids, your pets, the environment, and even your wallet will **thank you!**

References on file
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