



How to Dispose of Drugs Safely

By Alan S. Peterson, MD

The consequences can be deadly. More than 165,000 people in the U.S. died from overdoses related to prescription opioids between 1999 and 2014, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Pop singer Prince's death from a fentanyl overdose earlier last year put a celebrity face on the epidemic.

The safest and most environmentally responsible option is to take unwanted medications to a drug take-back site. Twice a year, the federal government partners with state and local law enforcement to operate temporary collection sites. The next National Prescription Drug Take-Back Day will likely take place in spring 2017. Check www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov for details.

If you can't find a disposal site, most government agencies, including the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, suggest you throw unwanted drugs into the trash, following these rules:

Remove the drugs from their containers and mix them with dirt, kitty litter or used coffee grounds to make them unappealing to kids and pets, and to dissuade anyone who might be hunting for drugs.

Place the mixture in a sealable plastic bag or other container before tossing it into the trash to prevent leaking.

Scratch out any personal information on prescription labels to protect your privacy before disposing of medicine containers.

The FDA says some drugs, such as fentanyl and oxycodone, should be flushed down the toilet despite the environmental risks if you can't find a take-back site because they're especially harmful. You can find the full list at <http://1.usa.gov/IYWB4q7>.

Old drugs may have lost effectiveness or directions for the use may have changed. For example, The American Academy of Pediatrics no longer recommends that children under 4 years of age take cold or cough medicines. And it's just a bad idea to have leftover painkillers hanging around – they could contribute to a family member's or friend's drug abuse problem.

There are reasons to go to a take-back site instead of tossing the medication yourself. Throwing drugs in the trash lets kids get at them and is a likely place for drug abusers to check after they've looked in the medicine cabinet. Flushing drugs down the toilet is also generally a bad idea. Several organizations cite human water health concerns; others cite evidence that flushed drugs can cause deformities in fish, such as reproductive abnormalities among smallmouth bass. The FDA wants to minimize drug residues in public water supplies.