

Tips on Safe Storage and Disposal of Your Prescription Medicines

National Council on Patient Information and Education



Where do you keep your medicines? Are they in different places—with some in the medicine cabinet, some in the kitchen, and some in the bedroom or elsewhere? As a parent, grandparent, or family member, it's important that you organize and keep track of your medicines.

After all, you will want to know where a particular medicine is when you or someone else needs to find it. And you will want to keep your medicines secure so that a child, or a teenager, or even a stranger, does not get into them. That way, you can help prevent an accidental injury, as well as do your part to stop the possible abuse of prescription medicines.

The first step in getting organized is to take a look at all the medicines you have. You should try to do this type of inventory every six months, or at least once a year.

Start by checking the expiration date on the bottle—you don't want to take any chances with a medicine that no longer works the way it's supposed to. Also, look for medicines that are discolored, dried out, crumbling, or show other signs that they are past their prime. Check the expiration date for eye drops and eardrops, too. They may no longer be effective and, worse, could be a breeding ground for bacteria or fungus.

In addition, look for leftover prescription medicines from a previous illness or condition. You will want to discard these since you should never try to treat yourself (or anyone else) with a prescription medicine. Your symptoms might seem similar to what you had before, but the cause could be different or the medicine may not be the right one this time around.



Proper Disposal of Prescription Medicines

Federal Guidelines developed by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in February 2007, encourage consumers to:

- Take unused, unneeded, or expired prescription drugs out of their original containers and throw them in the trash.
- Mixing prescription drugs with an undesirable substance, such as used coffee grounds or kitty litter, and putting them in impermeable, non-descript containers, such as empty cans or sealable bags, will further ensure the drugs are not diverted.
- Flush prescription medications down the toilet only if the label or accompanying patient information specifically instructs doing so.
- Take advantage of community pharmaceutical take-back programs or community solid-waste programs. Where these programs exist, they are a good way to dispose of unused pharmaceuticals.

Find a cool, dry area

Now that you've identified the medicines you want to keep, the next step is to find a safe place to keep them.

You'll want to store your medicine in an area that is convenient, but is also cool and dry – since heat and humidity can damage medicines. That's why a bathroom is not a good place to keep your medicines unless you are able to keep the room well ventilated. (However, the bathroom medicine chest is an ideal place to keep items such as bandages, tweezers, gauze, cotton balls, scissors, and other products that aren't affected by heat or humidity.)

Lock up your medicines

If there are children around, you might want to find an area where you can lock up your medicines. A cabinet or a drawer with a lock on it would work.

It's also an excellent idea to lock up any controlled substances that have been prescribed for you. These include medicines such as hydromorphone (Dilaudid®), oxycodone (OxyContin® and Percocet®), hydrocodone (Vicodin®), and alprazolam (Xanax®).*

The theft and abuse of prescription medicines is a serious problem. You play a big role in keeping these powerful medicines out of the hands of those who shouldn't have them. Since it is dangerous, as well as illegal, for anyone but you to use a controlled substance prescribed for you, a locked storage area can help keep a stranger or someone else from gaining access to them.

Be smart...and safe

Here are some other suggestions that can help you be smarter about storing and using your medicines.

- Keep your medicines separate from those of your spouse or other family members (for instance, on a different shelf or at least on a separate side of a shelf). This will make it less likely that you take the wrong ones by mistake.
- You may find it helpful to have a countertop or tabletop near where you keep your medicine so you can open the bottle with it resting on the flat surface. In case you drop your pill, it will land on the tabletop and not be lost down the drain or on the floor. (But be sure not to leave your medicine bottles out on the counter afterwards.)
- Good lighting near where you store your medicines will help you make sure you are taking the right medicine. Never take medicines in the dark.
- Keep the medicine in the bottle it came in. The amber color protects the medicine from light. You will also have the information right there about what the medicine is and how often to take it. The label will also have the phone number of the pharmacy so you can call when it is time for a refill.

- Never mix different medicines in the same bottle. You might end up taking the wrong one by mistake. It is also possible that some of one medicine could rub off on another and affect how well it works.
- Keep the lids on your pill bottles tightly closed. A cap can't be childproof if it's not fastened correctly.
- If there is cotton in the pill bottle when you first open it, remove the cotton and throw it away. The cotton can absorb moisture and affect the medicine that is inside.

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