

What Should I Do When My Meds Expire?: Ask a Pharmacist

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Your pharmacist is able to help you with far more questions about your health than you might realize, yet few people take advantage of this powerful tool in their health and wellness arsenal. When your medication expires, what is the best way to dispose of it? Pharmacists can help you with this type of question and many more, such as how to take medication, how medications interact, how to manage various disease states like high blood pressure and diabetes, and so on.

What should I do when my medication expires?

While flushing drugs down the toilet may be the common wisdom for expired medication, not all drugs are safe to dispose of in this fashion. Instead, put your medication in a plastic bag or tin mixed with old coffee grinds, kitty litter, and water. The water dissolves the medication, while coffee grinds and kitty litter dissuade animals or children from eating it. This is the Environmental Protection



After sealing the medication, make sure to get rid of any identifying information on the front of the bottle that may have your name, date of birth and other sensitive data displayed. Some pharmacies may offer disposal packs for your convenience.

"If the medication is a life saving medication (epipen, nitroglycerin, etc) hang on to it until you're able to replace it as soon as possible. If it is not a lifesaving medication it should be discarded immediately," says Stella Badalova, PharmD and Director of Healthcare Relations and Clinical Development at Medly Pharmacy.

It's important to clean out your medicine cabinet every three months and eliminate medication that hasn't been used in three months or more.

How do take-back programs work?

You can also check with your pharmacy or local public health department about a take-back program.

"Take-back programs work by collecting medications from people and discarding them appropriately," Badalova explains. Initiatives like these allow communities to safely dispose of unused, unwanted or expired drugs at collection sites like police stations. Medications collected by take-back programs are incinerated in a safe and secure facility such as a large or small municipal waste combustor, completely destroying the hazardous chemicals in these medications.

According to the EPA, "EPA encourages the public to take advantage of pharmaceutical take-back collection programs that accept prescription or over-the-counter drugs, as these programs offer a safe and environmentally-conscious way to dispose of unwanted medicines. This may be at a location such as a local law enforcement agency, retail pharmacy, hospital or clinic."

To find a local law enforcement agency that is participating in the Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) twice-a-year National Prescription Drug Take Back Days, see [DEA's website](#). To find other, more permanent collection programs in your community, see [DEA's authorized collector locator](#).

Can I flush expired meds down the drain?



This is not advised. Pouring unused medication down the drain or flushing them may cause those drugs to wind up in drinking water, may cause other ecological harm, and may cause difficulties in removing those chemicals from the public waterways. Flushing medications might have been okay in days past, but it is now considered an improper means of disposal.

"When a medication expires it's important to discard it properly. Preferably dropping it off at a pharmacy that has a drug disposal unit. Medications should never be flushed down the drain or just throw it in the garbage as this causes the drugs to get into our ecosystem and harm us," says Badalova.

That said, there are rare cases where flushing is recommended. This is usually because some drugs are fatal when taken by those to whom they are not prescribed, so you should dispose of them quickly before they can hurt anyone, and sometimes flushing these meds is simply the fastest solution.

[Here](#) is a list of drugs the FDA says should be flushed when it is time for them to be disposed of. According to the FDA, "FDA believes that the known risk of harm, including death, to humans from accidental exposure to the medicines listed above, especially potent opioid medicines, far outweighs any potential risk to humans or the environment from flushing these medicines."



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