Intermountain® Healthcare

Leftover Medications:
How to Dispose of Them Safely

Why dispose of unused medications?

When you take prescription medication as your doctor directs, this often means taking it until all the pills are gone. However, if your doctor changes your dose, decides on a different medication, or prescribes a few extra pills, you may have medication left over. You may also have a medicine cabinet full of expired prescription and over-the-counter medication from the past.

Unused prescription and over-the-counter medication can be dangerous, especially to children and pets. Unused pain medication can even be a target for theft. This handout tells you how to get rid of your medications safely.

How NOT to dispose of medications

Many people aren't aware of this, but most medications should NOT be poured down the sink, flushed down the toilet, or thrown directly in the trash in their original packaging. Here's why:

- **Small amounts of medication can enter the water system** when medication is poured down the sink or flushed down the toilet, even after the wastewater is treated.
- **Children or pets can find bottles of pills** when they are thrown in the trash. They can also be found by thieves who go through trash cans to find pain medication or get your personal information from the bottles.

How to get rid of medications safely

Here are three ways to dispose of your leftover medications:

- **Return them to any Intermountain Healthcare pharmacy.**
- **Drop them off at another drug collection site.** Check with your police department to see if they have a drug collection program. Or, check for a list of collection sites at **useonlyasdirected.org/safe-disposal**
- **Follow these steps to dispose of medications with your home trash:**

1. Pour medications from their bottles into a sealable bag. Remove or mark out any personal information on the bottles. Then throw the bottles away.

2. Crush the pills or capsules in the bag. You may add a little water to make it easier.

3. Mix in something unappetizing, such as kitty litter, coffee grounds, or dirt. This will help keep children or pets from eating the mixture.

4. Seal the plastic bag and put it in the trash.

Common questions about medications and the environment

- **How does medication enter our water system?** Your body doesn't process all of the medication you take, and the rest ends up in your urine. As a result, that medication can end up in the water system. While you cannot prevent this from happening, you can help limit the problem by disposing of your medications properly.
- **Does the water treatment plant remove all medication from our waste water?** No. Water treatment plants can leave trace amounts of medication in the water. Humans are not harmed by this small amount, but the effect on fish and wildlife is not known.
- **What should I do with expired medications?** Medications that are expired (past their "discard by" date) should not be used and may be treated like other leftover medications. Follow the instructions within this guide to properly dispose of expired medications.

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