



KAISER HEALTH NEWS

How to Dispose of Drugs Safely

Take them to a collection site or even your local pharmacy. **BY EMILY BAZAR**

VICODIN, PERCOCET AND OTHER opioid painkillers often languish in medicine cabinets for years, providing easy pickings for someone with an addiction.

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 this year put a celebrity face on the epidemic.

But flushing unwanted drugs down the toilet can taint water supplies. Drugs

tossed into the trash may also harm the environment, and they can be found by children or pets—or adults looking for a high.

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.

The number of year-round

disposal sites is growing, but your options depend on where you live and what kinds of drugs you're trying to get rid of. Some disposal sites won't accept "controlled" drugs, which include legal ones that are regulated by the government, such as addictive opiates. To find drop-off sites that accept controlled drugs, call 800-882-9539.

There's no consistent national collection system because there's no regular source of funding, says Heidi Sanborn, executive director of the National Stewardship Action Council, a nonprofit that advocates for more disposal options. "It depends on whoever can afford to offer it and whoever wants to do it," says Sanborn.

Check with your drugstore.

Walgreens has installed medication-disposal bins at 500 stores in 35 states. The bins are available during pharmacy hours and accept prescription medications, including controlled drugs and over-the-counter medications. They don't accept liquids, aerosol cans or "sharps," such as hypodermic needles, says Walgreens spokesman Phil Caruso. "Our goal is to get at the misuse of medications as well as to help curb the rise in overdose deaths," says Caruso. You can search for participating stores at www.walgreens.com. To find other pharmacies that accept unwanted drugs, search DisposeMyMeds.org. Not all accept controlled drugs.

If your search is still coming up short, try checking

with your garbage hauler, household hazardous waste program, hospital or local law-enforcement agency for drop-off options. Some companies also offer mail-back envelopes for drug disposal, but they usually charge a fee.

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>. ■

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