

Medicine Cabinet Safety

Keep yourself and your family safe by discarding old medications

If you have medications in your medicine cabinet or around your house that have been there for years, it's time to sort through them and throw them out.

There are several reasons why you shouldn't keep or take old medicine.

- Prescription medicines are given for specific reasons. Even if you think you have the same illness as before, you shouldn't take old medications.
 - You may be taking other medications or over-the-counter products, such as dietary supplements, vitamins or herbs, since the last time you were prescribed the older medication. There is a real risk that mixing two medications will make you sick. For example, the herb St. John's wort can reduce the effectiveness of HIV and birth-control drugs, as well as drugs for heart, cancer, depression and seizures.
 - Out-of-date medicine is less effective. Taking old medications that may no longer be full strength can lead to other medications not working in the future. In other words, you're giving the bacteria a chance to get stronger because you're not taking the full, effective dose that would kill the bacteria.

Telltale Signs of Old Medications

- Check the medication containers for moisture. If they are stored above a stove or other hot area or near a dishwasher or place with lots of moisture, the changing temperatures can break down the medicine.
 - Liquid medicines can separate over time, causing them to lose their strength. Check to see whether the medicine looks blended or whether it looks like two different liquids are in the container. Only smooth, well-blended liquid medication should be taken.
 - Check the date on all medications. A general rule of thumb is most medications are good for a year.
 - If you can no longer read the medicine label, definitely throw



it out. You never want to take a medicine when you're unsure what it is.

Throw Out With Caution

Whatever you do, *don't* flush your medications down the toilet. You can ask your pharmacist how to discard it. Some pharmacies will take your old medication; if they do not, they can tell you how to get rid of them. Also, your local solid waste management department or the local law enforcement agency should know the proper disposal method for your area.

If you want to do the job yourself, crush any tablets, open capsules or liquids and mix them with cat litter, used coffee grounds, sawdust or flour to prevent misuse. Then seal them in a plastic bag or milk carton. Only then can you throw it in the trash. n

Sources: American Pharmacists Association, Healthforums.com, Purdue School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences

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The purpose of this patient education handout is to further explain or remind you about a medical condition. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, be sure to discuss them with your healthcare provider. This handout may be reproduced for distribution to patients.