What Should I Know About Medication Storage and Disposal?

Properly storing and disposing of unused medications takes a little effort but is an important practice for the safety of yourself and others.

It is very common to have unused medications at home. Sometimes this is because medications are kept only for use if needed. Other times, it is because not all the pills in a bottle of prescription medication were taken.

What Are the Risks of Keeping Unused Medications?
Most medications have an expiration date past which the medication can be unpredictable and should not be used. It may have reduced effects or not work at all. It can be tempting to use old medications for a new symptom. For example, people with leftover antibiotics from a previous infection may try to take them for a new infection. This is dangerous because they may not work, can cause side effects, and may interfere with laboratory testing. Self-treating with old antibiotics can also delay seeking necessary medical attention.

Having medications at home that are not safely stored increases the risk of accidental poisoning among household members, especially children and pets. Medications such as opioids, stimulants, and benzodiazepines are particularly high risk because they have known harmful effects. They can be misused or accidentally taken by others. Keeping opioids in the home is associated with an increased risk that household members will experience an overdose.

How Should I Dispose of Unused Medications?
The safest choice is to bring unused medications to a local pharmacy for disposal. Most pharmacies will accept unused or expired medications at any time and free of charge. Some have secure drop-off containers. If your pharmacy cannot help, you can search an online list of drug disposal locations by zip code. If you do not have access to a medication disposal site in your community, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has specific instructions for how to dispose of different types of medications at home. Certain high-risk medications should be flushed down the toilet. Others should be emptied from the bottle and mixed in with garbage. To reduce the risk of theft and misuse, do not dispose of pill bottles that still contain medication.

Some medications are injected using syringes or needles, and some people use lancets to do a blood test for glucose levels. These sharp medical supplies must be disposed of in a designated sharps container. Do not place them directly into the trash. Once your sharps container is three-quarters full, follow instructions on how to dispose of the entire sealed container. If you are not sure about the best way to dispose of your unused medications, ask your doctor or local pharmacist for help.

What Should I Do With Medications That I Take Regularly?
Careful storage of medications is critical to keep household members safe and prevent accidental exposures. Keep all medications in childproof bottles stored in a secure location that is not accessible to children, other household members, visitors, or pets. Even over-the-counter medications and dietary supplements have the ability to cause significant harm or death if taken inappropriately. They should be stored in the same manner as prescription medications.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Medication disposal sites by zip code:
https://www.fda.gov/drugs/disposal-unused-medicines-what-you-should-know/drug-disposal-drug-take-back-locations
FDA instructions on safe disposal of medicines:
https://www.fda.gov/drugs/ensuring-safe-use-medicine/safe-disposal-medicines
American Academy of Family Physicians tips to keep kids safe from medications: