



Practice safety at home with opioid painkillers

Safe storage

Opioid medications need to be stored securely, preferably locked up just the way you would if you keep a firearm in your home.

- Choose a location in your house that is up and away and out of sight of children and visitors. Install a lock or use a locking medicine cabinet.
- Return medication to your secure location after every use. Avoid leaving medication or pill containers on countertops, tables or nightstands in open view where they can be easily accessed by others.
- Do not keep loose pills in easily opened plastic bags or containers in your purse, luggage or office drawer. Locking travel cases are available to carry prescription medicines.

Safe disposal

Once an individual is finished taking an opioid painkiller, they should promptly dispose of them and not keep these medications for "later."

- Take-back programs and events allow the public to bring unused drugs to a central location for proper disposal.
- Many pharmacies offer mail-back programs where you can pick up a drug disposal envelope at their nearest store. Most pharmacies charge a small fee for a postage paid envelope.
- Avoid flushing prescriptions down the toilet or pour in a drain because they can pollute water supplies. In some states, it is illegal to flush any medications.
- If a take-back or pharmacy mail-back program is not available in your community, you can go online to learn how to safely dispose of unused medications.

Visit nsc.org/disposalresources to find a take back program or learn how to safely dispose of unwanted medicine.

Don't mix

Opioid medications are dangerous because the difference between the amount needed to feel their effects and the amount needed to kill a person is small and unpredictable.

Respiratory depression is the chief hazard associated with opioid painkillers. Using them with alcohol, sleeping pills and anti-anxiety medications increase the respiratory depression caused by opioids. So if someone is drinking or taking tranquilizers and takes the usual doses of opioids, he or she may pass out, stop breathing and die.

- Never mix opioid medications with alcohol, sleep aids, anti-anxiety drugs or other pain relievers.
- Mixing extended-release and long acting opioids can be dangerous. Do not take extended-release opioids as-needed for pain or more frequently than the doctor prescribed.
- Individuals should talk to their prescriber and/or pharmacist to ensure they are not at risk for any other drug interactions.

Don't share

Do NOT share your opioid painkillers. Don't give a pill to a friend, family member or co-worker, even if the person is in pain. Sharing pain medication is illegal and dangerous.

- Opioid medications should not be given to, sold to, or 'borrowed' by friends or relatives.
- Keeping your medication in locked storage will prevent anyone else from taking your medications. Count and keep an inventory of your opioid pills so you will know if any go missing.
- The majority of people who abuse these drugs obtain them from friends or relatives.

Take-back programs and events allow the public to bring unused drugs to a central location for proper disposal.

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Safe medicine storage & disposal

Where do you keep your medicines? Are they in different places—some in the medicine cabinet, some in the kitchen, and some in the bedroom or elsewhere? Can you find them when you need them? And do you know how to safely dispose of them? Safe use of medicine also includes safe storage and disposal. Learn more below.

Storage

It's important that you organize and keep track of your medicines. After all, you want to know where a particular medicine is when you or someone else needs it. Always keep your medicines secure so that a curious toddler, a beloved pet, a meddling teenager, or even a visiting houseguest, does not get into them. (Some medicines, like prescription pain medications, have a "street value" and are stolen out of the medicine cabinets of friends and family members.)

- **Take an inventory** of the medicines you have in your home every six months.
- **Check the expiration date** on the bottle or package—you don't want to take any chances with a medicine that no longer works the way it's supposed to. Don't take medicines that are discolored, dried out, or crumbling. Check the expiration date for eye drops and eardrops, too. They may no longer be effective and, worse, could be a breeding ground for bacteria or fungus. Dispose of expired or unneeded medicines.
- **Discard leftover prescription medicines** from a previous illness or condition. You should never try to treat yourself (or anyone else) with an unused /old prescription medicine. Your symptoms might seem similar to what you had before, but the cause could be different or the medicine may not be the right one this time around.

Approximately 60,000 young children are brought to the emergency room each year because they got into medicines that were left within reach. Are all of the medicines in your home stored up and away and out of the sight of children?

Now that you've identified the medicines you want to keep, the next step is to find a safe place to keep them.

- **Pick a location that is up and away and out of sight**, like a kitchen cabinet or shelf in a hallway closet. Keep medicines away from crawling babies, curious toddlers and playful pets that may put what they find in their mouths. According to SafeKids Worldwide, 23% of young children who got into medicines and ended up in the emergency room had found [pills/tablets on the ground, and nearly 20% got into medicines stored in purses or diaper bags](https://www.safekids.org/infographic/medication-safety-infographic) (<https://www.safekids.org/infographic/medication-safety-infographic>).
- **Be aware that theft and abuse of prescription medicines—especially prescription pain and ADHD medications—is a serious problem.** You can play a role in keeping these powerful medicines out of the hands of those who shouldn't have them by storing them in a secure location in your home.
- **Store your medicine in an area that is convenient, but is also cool and dry**—since heat and humidity can damage medicines. The bathroom is usually **not** a good place to keep your medicines unless the room is well ventilated. Some medicines require refrigeration, so check the information on the medicine bottle or label.

More medicine storage tips

- 1 **Keep your medicines separate from those of your spouse or other family members** (for instance, on a different shelf or at least on a separate side of a shelf). This will make it less likely that you take the wrong ones by mistake.

- 2 **Use a countertop or tabletop near where you take your medicine** so you can open the bottle with it resting on the flat surface. In case you drop your pill, it will land on the tabletop and not be lost down the drain or on the floor. Never leave your medicine bottles out on the counter, especially if there are young children, teenagers or grandchildren in the house.)
- 3 **Have good lighting near where you store your medicines** to help you make sure you are taking the right medicine. Never take medicines in the dark.
- 4 **Keep the medicine in the bottle it came in.** The amber color of prescription containers protects the medicine from light. You will also have the label information right there about what the medicine is, its dosage and how often to take it. The label will also have the phone number of the pharmacy so you can call when it is time for a refill.
- 5 **If you do use a weekly pillbox** to help you remember to take your medicines, keep the original bottles so that you can quickly access dosing information and refill information that are generally printed on the bottle or packaging.
- 6 **Never mix different medicines in the same bottle.** You might end up taking the wrong one by mistake.
- 7 **Keep the lids on your pill bottles tightly closed.** A cap can't be child resistant if it's not closed correctly.

Disposal of prescription and OTC medicines

Most prescription and OTC medicines can be thrown away in the household trash. A few best practices are outlined below.

Tips for proper medicine disposal



- 1 **Mix the medicines (do not crush tablets or capsules) with an unpalatable substance** such as dirt, kitty litter, or used coffee grounds. This prevents thievery or diversion of medicines from the trash.
- 2 **Then, place the mixture in a container such as a zip-lock or sealable plastic bag,** and throw the container away in your household trash.
- 3 **Remove the label and/or scratch off all personal information** on the label when disposing of a prescription vial.
- 4 **Flush prescription medications down the toilet *only* if the label or accompanying patient information specifically instructs doing so** (i.e., for specific medications, such as prescription pain relievers that have a high potential to be abused; check the FDA's [list of medicines recommended for disposal by flushing](http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/EnsuringSafeUseofMedicine/SafeDisposalofMedicine) (<http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/EnsuringSafeUseofMedicine/SafeDisposalofMedicine>). Otherwise, medicines can be thrown away in the household trash.
- 5 **Take advantage of pharmacy "take-back" programs** or solid waste programs to dispose of unused or expired medicines.

Learn more



Learn more about medicine storage and disposal

- National and local ["drug take back" programs](http://www.takebackyourmeds.org/dea-events) (<http://www.takebackyourmeds.org/dea-events>)
- Alliance for Aging Research's [Safe Medication Disposal video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eh7O8IVzNs) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eh7O8IVzNs>)



Additional educational resources

- [Do's and Don't of Medicine Disposal](http://www.bemedwise.org/docs/chpaef-ncpiedisposalinfographic.pdf) (<http://www.bemedwise.org/docs/chpaef-ncpiedisposalinfographic.pdf>) infographic
- [Up and Away and Out of Sight](http://upandaway.org) (<http://upandaway.org>): Practice safe medicine storage to keep your kids and grandkids safe (in partnership with the CDC's PROTECT initiative)
- [Whose medicines are kids getting into and where are they finding the medicines?](https://www.safekids.org/infographic/medication-safety-infographic) (<https://www.safekids.org/infographic/medication-safety-infographic>) (SafeKids Worldwide)

USE MEDICINE SAFELY

[You, Your Medicines & Self-Care \(/medication-safety/self-care-self-medicating\)](/medication-safety/self-care-self-medicating)