

FS No. 047-1024

Disposal of U.S. Household Waste Pharmaceuticals

Background: Proper pharmaceutical disposal is an environmental health issue within the household and the environment. Unneeded or expired pharmaceuticals require prompt disposal to reduce the potential for abuse or accidental poisoning. Federal law prohibits the possession or use of someone else's prescription medication. It is illegal to distribute (share) prescription medications without a medical license. Additionally, taking an expired medication may pose serious health concerns due to reduced effectiveness. Pharmaceuticals are present in most urban water sources and wastewater treatment plants. Current wastewater treatment methods do not remove all types of pharmaceuticals and there are no enforceable limits of pharmaceuticals found in drinking water. Scientific studies suggest that a variety of pharmaceuticals is present in concentrations that adversely affect aquatic organisms.

Regulations: It is the patient's responsibility to dispose of their waste medications properly. The Secure and Responsible Drug Disposal Act of 2010, states that household-controlled substance wastes are exempt from Federal and State regulations. The Resource Conservation and Recovery Act also states that household waste is exempt from the hazardous waste regulations. Thus, waste generated from households, to include medication waste, is subject to only State and local regulations. Also, note that non-U.S. locations have their own regulations that will differ from the guidance provided in this fact sheet. Please consult the applicable Final Governing Standards and local host nation regulations for proper disposal of household pharmaceuticals.

Proper Disposal Options:

Take-Back: Ideally, proper medication waste disposal should remove the medication from the household and prevent it from entering water sources. This is best achieved by depositing the medication in a designated collection receptacle at a participating Defense Health Agency medical treatment facility, commercial pharmacy, or police station (see figure). These are typically located in the pharmacy lobby. Locations are be found using this link:

<https://apps2.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/pubdispsearch/spring/main?execution=e1s1>.

The second preferred method is to utilize one of the national semi-annual take-back events hosted by the installation or local police department. Both collection methods result in the incineration of the medications; thereby, keeping the active ingredients out of the waterways.

Home Disposal: If neither of the collection options are readily available and there is growing concern regarding potential abuse or poisoning, medications can be mixed with an unpalatable substance (such as kitty litter or used coffee grounds) within a sealed container (like a used detergent bottle) and placed in the general trash. Alternatively, if the medication is listed on the Food and Drug Administration Flush List, then it is acceptable to flush only these listed medications down the sink or toilet to prevent abuse or poisoning.

<https://www.fda.gov/drugs/disposal-unused-medicines-what-you-should-know/drug-disposal-fdas-flush-list-certain-medicines>



Source: U.S. Army Illustration, DCPH-A, Ethel Kefauver