

When a Loved One Passes – Handling Leftover Medication

When a loved one passes, family members are often left with the task of figuring out what to do with the medicines that are left behind. Below is a guide to understanding the laws surrounding this. Many of the medications that were necessary to keep a loved one as comfortable as possible are extremely dangerous for others, especially pets and children. It is important that they are disposed of quickly and appropriately.



What does the law say?

- The Disposal Act states that medications prescribed to a person at the time of death can be disposed of by a member of that person's household, or anyone who is legally entitled to dispose of that person's property. 21 U.S.C. 822(g)(4).ⁱ
- Home hospice and homecare personnel are not authorized to receive pharmaceutical controlled substances from ultimate users (the person whose name is on the prescription) for the purpose of disposal. However, long term care facilities are allowed to dispose of leftover medications.ⁱ

How do I properly dispose of leftover medications?

- The best way to dispose of unused medications is to take them to a local take-back event, or authorized prescription drug drop box. A list of local medication drop-off locations can be found at www.dumpthedrugsaz.org.
- Another option for proper disposal is disposal bags or containers. These products can be purchased online or in some pharmacies. They deactivate prescriptions at home and they can then be disposed of safely in trash. You can locate them through a google search of "rx drug disposal products."
- Last, you can follow the following steps to dispose safely at home:^{iv}
 - Mix medicines (do not crush tablets or capsules) with an unpalatable substance such as dirt, kitty litter, or used coffee grounds;
 - Place the mixture in a container such as a sealed plastic bag. Throw bag into the trash.
 - Scratch out all personal information on the prescription label of your empty pill bottle;

Why Is It Important to dispose of these medication quickly as possible?

- Unused or old medications pose the potential risk of:
 - **Poisoning.** Children or pets may ingest medicine and become sick or die.
 - **Medication Theft.** Prescription pain relievers, in particular, can be illegally sold or given away.
 - **Unsafe non-medical use by family members.** 2 out of 3 youth in Arizona get medications they abuse from every day sources like friends, family and the medicine cabinet.ⁱⁱ In Arizona, 13 percent of adults report misusing prescription drugs in the past 30 days - almost half of the misuse involved prescription pain relievers.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Improperly disposing of medications directly in the trash can leave them accessible for non-medical use. Improperly flushing some medications down the toilet can pollute water systems.

Sources

- https://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug_disposal/fact_sheets/disposal_public.pdf
- Arizona Criminal Justice Commission Arizona Youth Survey 2016
- St. Luke's Initiative Survey, 2010
- <https://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/EnsuringSafeUseofMedicine/SafeDisposalofMedicines/ucm186187.htm>

