

Old meds be gone—safely

Protect your family and the environment with these simple steps to dispose of medications

When pharmacist Rachelle Rocha saw Lillian*, one of her regular customers, approach with a sad smile and a plastic bag full of medications, she knew what had happened. Lillian’s father, who had been receiving end-of-life care at home, had passed away.

They spent a few minutes in quiet conversation, then walked to the end of the pharmacy counter where Lillian dumped the contents of the plastic bag into a specially designated bin. The bag contained her father’s unused medications, including pain medications, and a few other expired medications, vitamins and creams found in his home.

“As pharmacists we are privileged to be with so many of our patients and their loved ones throughout their life journey. We’re also equipped to take in unused and expired medications for safe disposal. It’s one less thing you have to worry about,” says Rocha, co-owner of Seasons Pharmacy and Culinaria in Sudbury, Ontario.

The safe disposal of medications protects your family and is essential to help protect the environment. Medications, even vitamins, should never be flushed down the toilet. Canadian studies have found evidence of pharmaceutical waste throughout the Great Lakes and trace amounts in drinking water. Regular garbage disposal is also not an option for medications, no matter how old. They can be found and consumed by children or pets, who can become ill. They eventually contaminate the soil of landfill sites.

The safe disposal of medications is also an important contribution to society’s efforts to prevent hospitalizations and deaths due to accidental overdoses of opioid drugs. Originally used as pain medication (for example for an injury, after surgery or as part of cancer treatment), leftover opioids can be misused or stolen. Their misuse has been a public health crisis in Canada for several years, which has worsened since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Courtesy of Seasons Pharmacy and Culinaria, Sudbury, Ontario

What you can do

Many pharmacies in Canada take back unused and expired medications, including nonprescription drugs and vitamins. Some also accept used medical sharps (needles and other medical devices designed to puncture the skin, such as for diabetes testing). Once you confirm a pharmacy, here are some tips:

- Empty all pills and tablets (including pain medications and medications for pets) into a plastic or paper bag, or a cardboard box.
- Place the empty containers for the pills and tablets (such as plastic prescription vials) in your recycling bin at home.
- Keep all liquids and creams in their original containers (such as tubes, bottles or jars) and place them in the bag or box with the pills and tablets; remove or black out all personal information.
- For medical sharps, most pharmacies in Ontario, Manitoba and P.E.I. participate in a government-approved program and can provide you with a sharps container at no cost. In other provinces, keep the sharps separate from medications and contact your municipality to get details on their disposal.
- Take your medications and/or sharps to the pharmacy right away or store them in a secure (ideally locked) location until you go to the pharmacy.

More information about the safe disposal of consumer health products can be found on the website of Canada’s Health Products Stewardship Association (www.healthsteward.ca).

*Name changed

Weighty matters



3.5 million
kilograms of medications



2 million
kilograms of sharps

Collected and safely disposed of by the Health Products Stewardship Association since it was established in 1999



HEALTH PRODUCTS
STEWARDSHIP ASSOCIATION