

Bring back the meds

As part of the fight against the opioid crisis, remind patients to return unused medications

Opioid stewardship has become increasingly important during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reminding your patients that they can bring back unused or expired medications is a simple step to help fulfill that role.

“I pay special attention when someone is undergoing treatment for cancer or receiving end-of-life care at home,” says Rachele Rocha, pharmacist and co-owner of Seasons Pharmacy and Culinaria, part of the Whole Health Pharmacy Partners group, in Sudbury, Ontario. “First and foremost, this is an opportunity to extend compassion and support. And when the time is right, I gently remind them or their caregivers to bring back any unused medications. In most of these bags there are narcotics and other controlled drugs.”

Recent data from the Government of Canada confirm that hospitalizations and deaths due to opioid poisoning have increased since the start of the pandemic.¹ A 2018 study found that one in three opioid-related deaths involved people with active opioid prescriptions.²

Prescribers (including veterinarians) can refer patients to a pharmacy for the safe disposal of all unused or expired medications, including topical and liquid medications, nonprescription drugs, vitamins and supplements. Some also accept used sharps. However, it’s important for patients to confirm their drop-off pharmacy before leaving their home with bags full of medications.

The likelihood of multiple potential drop-off sites is highest in B.C., Manitoba, Ontario and P.E.I. Their respective provincial governments have legislated Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) programs that require manufacturers of consumer health products to be responsible for and fund the safe disposal of their products. Manitoba, Ontario and P.E.I. also have EPR programs for medical sharps disposal.

The Health Products Stewardship Association (HPSA) executes these programs on behalf of manufacturers. There is no cost for pharmacies to become a collection site, and



Courtesy of Seasons Pharmacy and Culinaria, Sudbury, Ontario

Pharmacies on board



90%+ Pharmacies registered in HPSA’s programs in the provinces where available (B.C., Manitoba, Ontario, P.E.I.)

all forms and promotional materials are on HPSA’s website (healthsteward.ca). “The program is super easy,” says Rocha.

“We are global leaders in this space, especially with our sharps program,” says Terri Drover, Director-General of the HPSA. “Our program will expand as more provinces enact EPR regulations. Manufacturers welcome the framework this puts in place to encourage consumers to safely dispose of consumer health products.”

In Rocha’s pharmacy, consumers empty their bags in a smaller bin at the pharmacy counter and then a staff member transfers the contents to the program’s large bin in the dispensary, where it’s not accessible to the public. If people just drop off a bag, staff wear gloves and use a tong when checking the contents to lessen the risk of accidental punctures or cuts.

Opioids can be placed in the collection bin with all other medications. Or the pharmacy can separate them out and use their usual commercial provider for disposal. “We decided to take that extra step because we did not want the large bin to be a source of temptation for anyone,” says Rocha.

She adds that while people readily understand the importance of proper disposal, they need to be nudged. “We just posted a reminder on our social media and dozens of people came in with bags. Reminders are definitely worthwhile.”

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

1. Opioid- and Stimulant-related Harms in Canada. Government of Canada. Public Health Infobased. 2020 Dec. <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/substance-related-harms/opioids-stimulants>

2. Gomes T, Khoo W, Martins D, et al. Contributions of prescribed and non-prescribed opioids to opioid related deaths: population based cohort study in Ontario, Canada. *BMJ* 2018;362:k3207.



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