

Safe Storage and Disposal of Cancer Medications [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 02/2013

 [Listen to the Cancer.Net Podcast: Safe Storage and Disposal of Cancer Medications](#) [3], adapted from this content.

During and after cancer treatment, people may have one or more medications to take at home. These medications include drugs to help relieve side effects, such as pain, as well as drugs to treat the cancer. Because these are powerful medications, they can be extremely harmful if they are taken by someone other than the patient. Therefore, it is important that both patients and their caregivers are aware of the safest ways to store and dispose of the specific medications used during cancer treatment.

General tips

- Organize and keep track of all your medications. Consider keeping your medications someplace different from those of your spouse or other family members, such as on a different shelf or in a different cabinet or drawer.
- Store your prescriptions in a safe, cool, dry place that is out of the sight and reach of children and/or pets.
- Keep all of your medication in a place with good lighting so you can always read the label and make sure you are taking the right pill or tablet.
- Store your medication in the container it came in. This way you will always know which one is which and will have the information about how often to take it right at your fingertips. Always keep the lid tightly closed.
- Save and organize the information leaflets you get with your prescriptions from the pharmacy. These helpful references can remind you about when and how to take your medication, any special storage directions, and any potential side effects you may experience.

Special handling of pain medication

People diagnosed with cancer often experience pain [4], either from the cancer itself or as a side effect of cancer treatment. As a result, managing and treating pain [5] is an important part of a person's overall cancer treatment plan. This may involve the use of pain-relief medications called analgesics. For some people with moderate to severe pain, opioids, also known as narcotics, may be prescribed.

While these drugs are effective at relieving cancer pain, opioids are dangerous if they are accidentally swallowed by a family member or pet. In addition, people who abuse drugs may seek them out. Therefore, it is important to take additional steps to safely and securely store your opioid pain medication, such as:

- Always store pain medication in a bottle that has a child-resistant lid.
- Keep all of your opioid medication in one location where a pet, child, teenager, or stranger would not easily see it or get to it. Do not store pain medication in many different places around the house or leave it sitting out. Talk with your doctor about whether you should keep your pain medication in a secure lockbox that only you and your caregiver have access to.
- If you have been prescribed a fentanyl skin patch, make sure even used patches are kept away from others. According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), too much fentanyl can cause severe breathing problems and even death in babies, children, pets, and adults, especially those who have not been prescribed the drug. After using a patch, fold it in half so the sticky parts seal themselves and then safely dispose of it (see below).
- Only share details about your prescription(s) with your caregiver or others who need to know.

Special handling of oral chemotherapy

Many chemotherapy drugs are now given orally (taken by mouth, usually as capsules, tablets, or liquid) as take-home prescriptions. While this is often more convenient, there are a number of important things to consider when you or someone you are caring for is receiving chemotherapy at home:

- Make sure all chemotherapy is stored in its original container, in a safe place, and away from all other medications. Always remember that all medications need to be kept out of the reach of children and/or pets.
- Most oral chemotherapy needs to be stored at room temperature, away from excessive heat and moisture. This means chemotherapy should not be placed on a windowsill, near a sink, or in a bathroom.
- Some types of chemotherapy have special storage or handling instructions. For example, some need to be refrigerated. If you are not sure how a medication should be stored, ask the doctor or pharmacist.
- If you use a pill box or other type of medication organizer, have one for chemotherapy and one for any other medication(s). Make sure both boxes are clearly labeled.
- Keep the telephone number of the local poison control center handy in case a pet, child, or other member of your household accidentally swallows the medication. The national number, which will route you to the local center based on your area code, is 800-222-1222.

Disposing of medications

When you no longer need a medication, it is important to get rid of it as safely as possible. A good first step is to talk with your doctor or pharmacist, or read the informational guide that came with the prescription, to learn how to safely dispose of each medication. Options may include:

Participating in a local drug take-back program. Prescription medication take-back programs allow people to bring any unused or expired drugs to a central location so they can be disposed of properly. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration sponsors periodic [national prescription-drug take-back days](#) [6] with collection sites around the country. Your city or county government's household trash and recycling service and your pharmacist are also good resources to ask about other take-back programs in your community.

Flushing unused pain medication. The FDA recommends that [some opioid medications](#) [7] be flushed down the toilet. However, some communities have rules and restrictions against this. When in doubt, check with your local water treatment and/or sanitation department. Oral chemotherapy should never be flushed down the toilet (see below).

Throwing the medication away. If you can't take your medication to a disposal location or flush it, you may need to put it in the trash, with the exception of oral chemotherapy (see below). However, it is very important to follow these steps:

- Take all of the medication out of its container.
- Put the medication in a sealable container, such as a plastic bag or coffee can.
- Mix the medication with an undesirable substance such as cat litter or used coffee grounds.
Do not crush pills, tablets, or capsules.
- Seal the container and be sure to put it in the trash, not the recycling.
- Remove the label or completely cross out any personal information before putting an empty container in the recycling bin or trash. This will help protect your identity.

Returning chemotherapy to your doctor. You should never throw leftover chemotherapy in the trash or flush it down the toilet. Normally, you will not have extra oral chemotherapy because it is prescribed in the exact dosage and amount you need. However, if you do, return it to your doctor or nurse for disposal. Also, ask a member of your health care team ahead of time if the empty containers or any other chemotherapy waste needs to be returned to the doctor's office or treatment center for safe disposal.

If you have additional questions about disposing of unused or expired medications, ask your doctor or pharmacist how to proceed. You can also call the FDA at 888-INFO-FDA (888-463-6332).

More Information

[ASCO Answers Fact Sheet: Safe Storage and Disposal of Pain Medications \(PDF\)](#) [8]

[Drug Information Resources](#) [9]

[The Importance of Taking Your Medication Correctly](#) [10]

Additional Resources

[FDA: Medication Disposal: Questions and Answers \[11\]](#)

[FDA: How to Dispose of Unused Medications \[12\]](#)

Links:

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/managing-your-care/safe-storage-and-disposal-cancer-medications>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/safe_storage_and_disposal_of_cancer_medications.mp3

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25259>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24585>

[6] http://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug_disposal/takeback/index.html

[7]

<http://www.fda.gov/drugs/resourcesforyou/consumers/buyingusingmedicinesafely/ensuringsafeuseofmedicine/safedisposalofme>

[8] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/asco_answers_safe_storage_and_disposal.pdf

[9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25369>

[10] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24703>

[11]

<http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/EnsuringSafeUseofMedicine/SafeDisposal>

[12]

<http://www.fda.gov/downloads/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/UnderstandingOver-the-CounterMedicines/ucm107163.pdf>