

Safe Storage & Disposal of Pain Medications

Why do doctors prescribe pain medication(s)?

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

Why is it important to know how to store my pain medication(s)?

Although opioids are very effective at managing and relieving cancer pain, they are dangerous if a family member or pet accidentally swallows them. Fentanyl skin patches (see below) can stick to the hands and feet of kids and pets, who can absorb the drug, even if the patch has already been used. In addition, people who use drugs may seek them out. Therefore, it is important to take additional steps to safely and securely store your prescription pain medication.



What steps should I take to safely store my pain medication(s)?

It is important to store your pain medication in a bottle that has a child-resistant lid. You should also keep all of your opioid medication in a location where a pet, child, teenager, or stranger would not easily see it or get to it. Consider storing your pain medication in a secure lockbox that only you and your caregiver can open. Some people have safes to secure cash, documents, or firearms, and those can be used, as well. Do not store your pain medication in many different places around the house or leave it sitting out. Finally, only share details about your prescription(s) with your caregiver or others who need to know.

How should I get rid of any old or unused medication?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommends that some opioid medications be flushed down the toilet. However, some communities have rules and restrictions against this. Another option is to take any unused or expired drugs to a prescription medication take-back program collection site. If you can't take your medication to a collection site or flush it, you may need to put it in the trash. To do this safely, take all of the medication out of its container and put it in a sealable plastic bag or coffee can. Then mix the medication with an undesirable substance such as cat litter or coffee grounds. Finally, seal the container and be sure to put it in the trash, not the recycling.

How should I dispose of used pain-relief skin patches?

If you have been prescribed a fentanyl skin patch, make sure used patches are kept away from others. According to the 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 are sealed together and flush it down the toilet or use another of the disposal methods listed above.

Questions to ask the health care team

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking your health care team the following questions:

- Would you explain the options for managing my pain with medication?
- Why is it important for me to safely store and dispose of my pain medication?
- Where is the best place for me to keep my medication?
- Should I lock up my pain medication? If so, where would you recommend?
- What should I do if a pet or family member accidentally swallows or comes in contact with my medication?
- What should I do if some or all of my medication goes missing?
- What should I do with any leftover medication if my prescription changes or if I don't need to take it any more?
- Is it safe for me to flush any old or unused pain medication down the toilet?
- Are there any drug take-back programs in my area? Or should I return left over medication to a member of my health care team?
- Whom should I call if I have any questions or problems?

Find more information about how to safely store and dispose of cancer medications at www.cancer.net/safestorage. Download the free Cancer.Net mobile app to get more questions and track your prescriptions at www.cancer.net/app.

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WORDS TO KNOW

Analgesic:

A medication that relieves pain

Breakthrough pain:

Pain that occurs between regularly scheduled doses of pain medication

Drug disposal:

Getting rid of or destroying unused medication

Neuropathic pain:

Burning, shooting, or numbing pain from nerve damage

Opioid:

A medication that requires a prescription and provides strong pain relief

Pain threshold:

The point at which pain is noticeable

Pain tolerance level:

The peak amount of pain that a person can endure

Prescription medication:

A medication that is only available from a pharmacy with written instructions from a doctor, nurse practitioner, or physician assistant

Rescue medicine:

A medication used to control breakthrough pain

Take-back program:

National or local initiatives to collect unused prescription medications so they can be disposed of in a safe, legal, and environmentally friendly way

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