



Mid-Maryland Internal Medicine

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What You Need to Know About Expired Medications

It's a common problem. You have a headache and reach for a bottle of aspirin only to discover that, according to the label, it "expired" six months ago. Do you take it or drive to the drugstore for a fresh batch? There isn't a lot of information on medication packaging about just what "expired" means or what the risks, if any, are of taking medications that are past their expiration date. Read on to learn all you need to know about expired meds.

What Expiration Dates Mean

According to Ilisa Bernstein, the deputy director of the Office of Compliance in the FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research, "The medicine expiration date is a critical part of deciding if the product is safe to use and will work as intended. Once the expiration date has passed there is no guarantee that the medicine will be safe and effective." ([Read the entire statement](#)). The bottom line - the fact that a drug expiration date has passed doesn't mean that the drug is no longer safe and effective, it means that that manufacturer no longer guarantees that it is safe and effective.

In fact, many experts believe that drugs degrade very slowly and that package expiration dates represent a conservative view of when drugs should be discarded. In 2006, the Journal of Pharmaceutical Sciences published the [results of a multi-year study](#) of 122 drugs that had been used in the Department of Defense over the prior twenty years. On one hand, the study found that almost 90% of the drugs were stable for more than one year past their expiration date, with many drugs remaining stable for several years. On the other hand, stability varied considerably from drug to drug, and sometimes even across different batches of the same drug. It is also important to note that drugs maintained by the Department of Defense are stored in climate-controlled, regulated areas much different than your bathroom cabinet or car glove compartment. A [2012 study](#) published in the Journal of the American Medical Association reached a similar conclusion, finding that most drugs remained potent far beyond their expiration date.

Key Points

With so many different drugs maintained in so many different forms, it's difficult to generalize about whether it is advisable to take drugs beyond their expiration dates. Here are a few rules of thumb:

- If any of the drugs you are taking can mean the difference between life and death (for example, nitroglycerin, insulin or EpiPens), do not take chances by relying on expired medications. Keep them up to date.

Learn
More



[Watch a video](#)
that summarizes the Food
and Drug Administration's
position on expired
medications.

- Drugs in liquid suspensions or drugs that need to be refrigerated go bad relatively quickly and should always be kept up to date
- If you have a cold, headache, allergies or back pain and all you have at home are medicines that expired within the last year or two, there is probably no harm in taking them, although there is a small chance that they will have lost some of their potency
- While the biggest problem from taking most expired drugs is that they may not be as effective, there is some evidence that taking expired Tetracycline may actually be harmful
- Use common sense. If a drug has a strong smell or it is an ointment that comes out crystallized, don't use it
- Store drugs wisely. That generally means tightly closed, in a cool, dry place away from direct sunlight (and *always* in their original container to avoid taking the wrong drug by mistake). And it goes without saying that drugs should always be stored out of the reach of children or pets.
- If you have any questions about taking expired drugs, ask Dr. Pierce or Dr. Afrookteh

Disposing of Expired Medications

OK, so you've made the decision never to use that five year old bottle of pills in your closet. What should you do with them?

Whatever you do, don't just leave them there. Drugs that languish in home medicine cabinets are susceptible to misuse, either intentional or inadvertent. More than 7 million Americans currently abuse prescription drugs and according to the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, about 2,500 teens a day use prescription drugs to get high for the first time.

There are at least two ways to dispose of drugs properly. Probably the easiest is to take advantage of Frederick County's *Drug Take Back* program. Through a collaborative effort between the Frederick County Health Department and local law enforcement agencies, you can deposit unwanted drugs in one of the *MedReturn* boxes at any of the following locations:

Frederick County Police Department
100 West Patrick Street
Frederick, MD 21701

Maryland State Police Barracks
110 Airport Drive East
Frederick, MD 21701

Middletown Municipal Center
31 W Main Street
Middletown, MD 21769



There are additional locations in Thurmont, Brunswick and Emmitsburg. You can learn more about the program at the [Frederick County website](#).

If you choose to dispose of drugs at home, the FDA recommends that you follow four steps:

Follow these simple steps to dispose of medicines in the household trash*

MIX
Mix medicines (do not crush tablets or capsules) with an unpalatable substance such as dirt, kitty litter, or used coffee grounds;

PLACE
Place the mixture in a container such as a sealed plastic bag;

THROW
Throw the container in your household trash;

SCRATCH OUT
Scratch out all personal information on the prescription label of your empty pill bottle or empty medicine packaging to make it unreadable, then dispose of the container.

* For more information on safe medicine disposal, go to FDA's "Disposal of Unused Medicines: What You Should Know" web page.

1. Mix the medicine (if pills or capsules, do not crush them) with an inedible substance, like dirt, kitty litter or used coffee grounds;
2. Place the mixture in a sealed bag;
3. Throw the container in your household trash;
4. Scratch out any personal information on the label of your prescription bottle before disposing of it.

For some drugs that are especially harmful, the FDA strongly recommends that they be deposited in a *MedReturn* box. If that is not possible, they should be flushed down a sink or toilet to eliminate the possibility of them being taken by someone for whom they were not prescribed. This [list of especially harmful drugs](#) can be found on the FDA website.