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Medication
Safety

Q: Expired medications — how hazardous?

A: Drug manufacturers must guarantee the safety and effectiveness of medications up to the expiration date. When stored under proper conditions, the drugs must have a potency of 90% or higher at expiration. After that time, some medications lose potency very quickly and others more slowly.

Deteriorating drugs may not work as intended to treat health conditions. Even a small decrease in effectiveness can create severe problems for some people. In rare instances, expired medications can degrade into harmful substances.

Before taking an expired medication, first check with your pharmacist or health care provider. Certain medications should never be used past their expiration dates while others can.

Additional dangers can result from keeping expired or unused medications around. Children and pets may eat them by mistake. People who take someone else's prescription may suffer adverse effects. Leftover painkillers and addictive drugs also contribute to the growing problem of prescription drug addiction.

To avoid these problems, properly dispose of medications as quickly as possible once they're no longer needed. Some options:

- ➡ Follow disposal instructions on the label or patient information.
- ➡ Mix the medicine with an undesirable substance such as kitty litter or used coffee grounds, put it in a sealable plastic bag, and throw it away in the trash. Dispose of the container separately after blacking out personal information.
- ➡ Go to a National Prescription Drug Take-Back Day event hosted by the Drug Enforcement Administration.
- ➡ Take the medicine to a DEA-authorized collection site or ask your pharmacist about disposal.

— Elizabeth Smoots, MD, FAAFP



Rx for Medication Safety

From antibiotics, vaccines and anesthetics to lifesaving drugs for hundreds of conditions, the development of medications has been a remarkable achievement in recent decades. Drugs help us live longer, healthier lives — provided we take them seriously.

Misuse of medications is common. It can cause harmful health effects that lead to thousands of hospitalizations and deaths each year in the U.S. By staying aware and involved in your health care, you can lower your risks and get the most from your medicine.

Quick Tips for Buying Medicine Online:

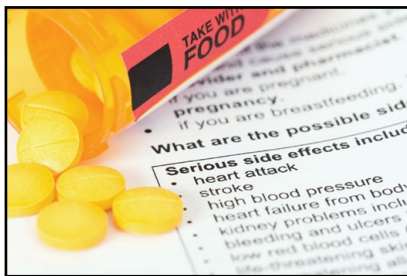
- ✓ Never buy from online pharmacies that don't require your provider's prescription.
- ✓ Don't give personal information or credit card numbers unless you're sure the site will protect them.
- ✓ Use sites that have a pharmacist available for questions.
- ✓ Buy only from licensed pharmacies in the U.S.

Go to [fda.gov](https://www.fda.gov) and enter **BeSafeRx** in the search engine to learn about finding safe and legal online pharmacies.



Q: What is a black box warning?

A: It's a boxed statement on the label of prescription drugs or medical devices that calls attention to potentially serious or life-threatening product risks.



A **black box warning** is the Food and Drug Administration's most severe warning; it's reserved for products with side effects that may cause grave injury, illness or death. Many drugs have received black box warnings in recent years.

The FDA has created fast-track drug approval, allowing new drugs to reach the market more easily. But since the FDA has only a short time to review fast-tracked drug side effects before giving approval, the drugs are more likely to receive boxed warnings after release.

People who take new drugs are at the highest risk for serious unknown side effects. Ask your health care provider about older drugs you can take since they usually have been studied longer.

— Elizabeth Smoots, MD, FAAFP

6 Steps to Safe Medication:



Whether you use a long list of prescription medicines or simply reach for an over-the-counter drug now and then, learn about what you're taking.

1. Maintain a list of ALL your medicines — and keep it updated.

Include prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medicines and vitamin, mineral and herbal supplements. Always carry your list when you meet with each of your health care providers or go to the hospital.

2. Learn why you need specific drugs. If your provider prescribes a new medicine, understand how it will help you. You're more likely to use it correctly, know what to expect and report any problems to your provider.

3. Ask about possible side effects with your drugs. Many medicines and supplements produce some degree of side effects — your provider and pharmacist can teach you what to expect. **Tip:** Some drug side effects may bother you at first but soon ease up. Call your provider if you have serious, persistent or recurrent reactions; you may need a different medicine or dosage.

4. Ask about possible interactions when using multiple drugs. Review your list of medications and supplements with your provider. If you use alcohol or tobacco, ask about any impact from these substances while taking medicines or supplements.

5. Learn how to use each medicine. Ask your provider when to take it and for how long. Whether it's a prescription or an OTC medicine, read the label and always use as directed.

6. Try to have all your prescriptions filled at the same pharmacy. It will track all your drugs and alert you or your provider if a new drug might cause problems. Your pharmacist is a vital member of your health care team, ready to assist and answer your questions.

When you discuss medications with your provider or pharmacist, make sure you understand the answers. The more you know about the drugs you use, the safer and more effective they will be.

