

## OTC: How Important is that Expiration Date on your Pill Bottle?

***Plus: you're storing your meds all wrong***

By Heather Buschman, PhD | February 26, 2019

**Y**ou're holding a bottle of prescription medication or cough syrup or ibuprofen, notice that it expired last month (or year) and you wonder ... how bad can it be if I take this? And if you're really not feeling well, that prospect seems a lot more attractive than driving out to a pharmacy for a fresh bottle.

Don't be tempted, the [U.S. Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\) advises](#) [↗](#). Over time, medications can change in chemical composition and become contaminated with bacteria or mold.



“Past the expiration date, there is no guarantee the medicine is still safe and effective,”

said Alex Luli, PharmD, pharmacist and health sciences assistant clinical professor at Skaggs School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences at UC San Diego. “What’s more, product

labeling is constantly being updated, so there may be new dosing recommendations or important new warnings that weren't on the old packaging."

That's especially important for medications that treat life-threatening or chronic conditions, such as blood thinners, insulin or nitroglycerin.

"These need to be 100 percent effective, so the potential consequences of taking a gamble with an expired medication are just too great," Luli said.

Old antibiotics should also be discarded, he said. While not necessarily life-threatening in the short-term, using a partial dose or partially-effective antibiotics can contribute to the rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

But what about expired over-the-counter cough and cold medicines? Luli said he gets asked about those most often.

"In some cases, it may be okay. I usually tell people that expired cough medicines are likely safe, but might not work as well." Luli said. "So try it, and if doesn't relieve symptoms, get a new one. Likewise, if it's aspirin you need for a headache and it's two months past expiration, it's probably fine, but may not work as intended."

### **What you can do**

To help your medications last as long as possible, Luli recommends storing them in a cool, dry, dark place.

"Heat, light and moisture can all degrade medications," he said. "So the most common places people store their medications — the bathroom and the kitchen — aren't ideal due to humidity and heat exposure. A hall closet would be the best, as long as the medications are out of reach of kids and pets, of course."

Luli also recommends regularly clearing out your cupboards, safely disposing of expired medications to reduce the temptation later. Leftover opioid medications sitting around the house are especially worrisome, as they can inspire misuse and theft. To deter opioid-seekers, experts advise mixing unneeded pills with kitty litter, coffee grounds or bleach to make them unappetizing before discarding them. You can contact your sheriff's department to learn about "prescription take back" programs in your area. At UC San Diego Health, patients can discard personal, unused prescription opioids with MedSafe, a secure collection bin located in the Pain Management Clinic in the Koman Family Outpatient Pavilion at UC San Diego Health in La Jolla.

Luli encourages patients to talk to their pharmacists or other health care providers if they have any questions about their medications.

"We can help you work through the issue, and personalize a plan for you," Luli said.

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