Pharmacies Aren’t Doing Their Part to Aid in Opioid Disposal

A recent survey found that pharmacies are insufficiently educating the public about unused opioid and antibiotic disposal.

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A recent survey found that U.S. pharmacies are inadequately educating the public about how to dispose of unused opioid medications and antibiotics and that a scant number have take-back programs for such drugs.

Reducing the number of unused opioids and antibiotics in Americans’ medicine cabinets is vital to combating the twin crises of opioid misuse and emerging drug-resistant pathogens. Unused opioids may wind up ingested by individuals with or at risk for opioid use disorder. Taking antibiotics for infections for which they were not intended or failing to finish an entire course of antibiotics can each give rise to drug-resistant strains of bacteria or other pathogens.

When a drug take-back program is not available, the Food and Drug Administration recommends that individuals mix unused antibiotics with an unpalatable substance, such as used coffee grounds or kitty litter; seal them in an enclosed container; and dispose of them. This prevents the drugs from being ingested or winding up in the water supply.

Unused opioids should be flushed down the toilet, since people may still extract them if they are thrown in the trash.

Researchers at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) conducted a telephone survey of U.S. pharmacies and found that 47% gave their customers correct instructions on how to dispose of antibiotics, and only 19% did so with regard to disposing opioids. A mere 10% offered take-back programs for unused medications.

“This clearly points to the need for better dissemination of information on proper medication disposal,” said Hillary Copp, MD, an associate professor of urology at UCSF and the senior author

of the study, which was published in Annals of Internal Medicine. “The FDA has specific instructions on how to dispose of these medications, and the American Pharmacists Association has adopted this as their standard. Yet it’s not being given to the consumer correctly the majority of the time.”

To read a press release about the study, click here.

To read the study abstract, click here.

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