

3 steps for physicians to boost safe storage, disposal of opioids

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More than 70 percent of people using opioid analgesics for nonmedical reasons get them from family or friends. A new recommendation from a task force composed of representatives from more than 25 state, specialty and other health care professional organizations strongly urges physicians to take three essential steps that can help further reduce the amount of unwanted, unused and expired medications and make their diversion to nonmedical use much less likely.

The first step, says the new advice from the AMA Task Force to Reduce Opioid Abuse, is to **talk with patients** and emphasize that opioid analgesics should only be used as directed and that misuse or diversion of prescribed medications can be illegal and potentially deadly.

The second step is to **remind patients to safely store their medications**. The CDC recommends that clinicians “discuss risks to household members and other individuals if opioids are intentionally or unintentionally shared with others for whom they are not prescribed, including the possibility that others might experience overdose at the same or at lower dosage than prescribed for the patient.”

The Safe Homes Coalition (SHC), a nonprofit started in San Diego to raise awareness about the proper use, storage and disposal of prescription medication, offers these tips:

- Organize and keep careful track of prescribed and over-the-counter medications. Keep stronger medicines separate from items more commonly found in medicine cabinets, keep medicines in the original bottle or container that it came in and never mix medications in the same bottle.
- Keep medicines secure. Ensure that all lids close tightly, and treat medications like you would other valuables. Make sure they are concealed when guests or visitors are in your home. The SHC even recommends installing a lock box in your medicine cabinet.

The third step is to **urge patients to dispose of unused medications**. Patients should be educated on how to safely dispose of expired, unwanted and unused medication. Whenever possible,

prescription medicines should be given to a local “take back” or mail back program. If this is not an option, you can find an authorized drug-disposal location nearby, such as at a police station, a Drug Enforcement Administration-authorized pharmacy or another collection site that has a secure drop-box program.

While the AMA task force urges physicians to make discussion with patients on safe storage and disposal of opioids a routine part of clinical practice, it is worth noting that National Prescription Drug Take Back Day is coming soon, Saturday, April 29. The annual event, held between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., intends to provide numerous safe, convenient and authorized means of disposing of prescription drugs to prevent misuse. Multiple drug take-back locations will be open to the public.

The AMA task force’s three-step recommendation on safe storage and disposal is available as a flyer, and is the latest recommendation to emerge from the multi-stakeholder body. In 2015, the task force identified five other goals in the effort to reverse the opioid epidemic:

- Increase physicians’ registration and use of effective prescription drug-monitoring programs.
- Enhance physicians’ education on effective, evidence-based prescribing.
- Reduce the stigma of chronic pain and promote comprehensive assessment and treatment.
- Reduce the stigma of substance-use disorder and enhance access to treatment.
- Expand access to naloxone in the community and through co-prescribing.

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