Workers' Comp

Ask The Pharmacist: Proper Medication Storage and Expiration Dates Explained

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How does storing medications ensure their safety and effectiveness until the expiration date?

Proper storage is essential to ensure the potency and safety of medications until their expiration date. Different medications have specific storage needs. Some may require refrigeration, others may need to be kept in a freezer, and certain medications must be protected from light.

Be mindful that heat, air, light and moisture can compromise a medication's integrity. Pills and capsules are particularly sensitive to these elements. For instance, aspirin can break down into vinegar and salicylic acid, which may cause stomach irritation. Always check the manufacturer's recommendations on the packaging or ask a pharmacist for guidance.

While many believe that medicine cabinets in bathrooms are ideal for storing medications, these locations can expose medications to heat and humidity from showers and baths, potentially compromising their potency or spoiling before their listed expiration dates. Instead, opt for a cool, dry place, such as:

- A drawer in the bedroom
- A kitchen cabinet (away from hot appliances like the stove or oven)
- Storage boxes, shelves or closets

Always keep medication in its original container to maintain its quality and integrity. The original packaging is designed to protect the medication from environmental factors. Additionally:

- Remove cotton balls from medicine bottles, as they can trap moisture inside.
- Ensure the container is tightly closed after each use.

- If there are children or pets in the home, be sure medications are stored out of reach or securely locked away.

Understanding Expiration Dates

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) describes drug expiration dates as “the time period during which the product is known to remain stable, which means it retains its strength, quality, and purity when it is stored according to its labeled storage conditions.”

It’s important to check expiration dates regularly. The date printed on the manufacturer’s bottle indicates how long the product remains stable under recommended storage conditions. If a pharmacy has repackaged the medication into amber vials or bottles, it’s typically effective for one year from the fill date if stored correctly, which should be noted on the label. While expired medications may still possess some effectiveness, their safety and potency can’t be guaranteed.

Understanding the risks associated with taking expired medications or those that haven’t been stored properly is essential. As a medication degrades, it may lose potency, failing to deliver the intended benefits. Additionally, degradation can lead to the formation of toxic compounds, resulting in unexpected side effects.

This information is meant to serve as a general overview, and any specific questions should be more fully reviewed with your health care professional such as the prescribing doctor or dispensing pharmacist.

Do you have a workers’ compensation or auto related pharmacy question? Send us an email at AskThePharmacist@enlyte.com.

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References:

https://www.fda.gov/drugs/pharmaceutical-quality-resources/expiration-dates-questions-and-answers

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