

Remove the Risk: help prevent drug overdoses

Removing the risk is one way to help reduce accidental use and misuse of prescription medicines.

Please help prevent drug overdoses and keep harmful substances out of the environment by properly disposing of expired, unused and unwanted human and pet medications. South Heartland District Health Department partners with area law enforcement agencies in our four counties, as well as the Area Substance and Alcohol Abuse Prevention (ASAAP) coalition and local pharmacies, to provide safe ways for residents to dispose of medications.

National Drug Take Back events occur twice a year to provide families easy, no-cost, anonymous opportunities to get rid of unnecessary medicines stored in your home that can be susceptible to abuse or theft, or accidental use by little ones or pets.

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), “about 35,000 young children end up in emergency rooms each year because they got into medicines while an adult wasn’t looking.” And, if we look at all Americans over the age of 12, more than 52 million (18%, or about 1 in every 6 people) have deliberately misused prescription drugs at least once in their lifetime ([National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics](#)). **Nationally**, about 14% of high school students (1 in every 7) have misused prescription medications sometime in their lifetime and about half that number reported current prescription opioid misuse in 2019 (MMWR).

In the South Heartland health district (Adams, Clay, Nuckolls, Webster) our rates of abuse seem to be lower - just under 4% of high school students reported misusing prescription medications sometime in their lifetime (1 in every 27 locally, compared with 1 in every 7 nationally).

There are several sources where adults and children are able to inappropriately access prescribed medications: misusing their own doctor-prescribed medications by taking doses beyond the recommended amount, in quantity or frequency; misusing prescription drugs obtained from a friend or relative – either stolen or freely given; and purchasing from strangers/dealers or from friends/relatives.

Of concern, local data shows that more than 14% of high school students surveyed in 2021 said that prescription medicines were easy or very easy to obtain for non-medical use, with most reporting they took the prescription medicines from home without their parent’s knowledge.

It’s also important to keep prescription medications from accidentally getting into hands and mouths of those for whom they are not prescribed – which includes our little ones and our pets. With the little ones in mind, the CDC suggests emergency room visits can be prevented by following these six tips:

- Put medicines up and away and out of children’s reach and sight
- Put medicines away every time.
- Make sure the safety cap is locked.
- Teach your children about medicine safety.
- Tell your guests about medicine safety.
- Be prepared in case of an emergency: Call your poison control center at 800.222.1222 right away if you think your child might have gotten into a medicine or vitamin, even if you are not

completely sure. Program the Poison Help number into your home and cell phones so you will have it when you need it.

Our pets can also get into medications. The Food and Drug Administration ([FDA](#)) has safety tips to help prevent your pets or people from accidentally eating pet medications, including:

- Keep pet medications in their original containers with intact labels and store them in a secure location. What you may think is “out of reach” of your pet may, in fact, not be. Cats are good jumpers and a determined dog with a good nose can devise clever ways to reach that pill vial at the back of the cabinet, especially if the medication is flavored.
- Note that medication containers that are child safe may not be pet safe.
- Store pet medications away from people medications to prevent a mix-up. If you accidentally ingest a pet medication, call your physician or local poison control center. If you accidentally give a medication intended for people to your pet, call your veterinarian or an animal poison control center.

I am sad to report it is statistically likely that you or someone you know has abused a prescription drug within the last 12 months. Here are some tips from the National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics on Prescription Abuse Prevention:

- Always follow usage instructions. Never use a prescription in a way other than as directed by your doctor.
- Don't order prescriptions online unless it is with a known reputable pharmacist. Many cases of accidental overdose can be traced to websites advertising as pharmacies that fill prescriptions at a very discounted rate. Many of these drugs are counterfeit and contain deadly doses of a substance unknown to the user.
- Never sell or give away prescription drugs. Sharing prescriptions is dangerous for many reasons, among them enabling drug abuse.
- Always properly dispose of leftover prescriptions. Many pharmacies offer safe destruction and disposal services for prescription drugs.

Finally, many law enforcement agencies participate in National Drug Take Back Days in April and October each year. The next Drug Take Back event is Saturday, April 22. To find a location near you: <https://www.dea.gov/takebackday#collection-locator>.

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