

Media reporting of unused opioid medication disposal

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Proper and timely disposal of unused prescription opioid medication can prevent accidental overdose or misuse of these medicines. However, the debate surrounding unused opioid medicines and whether people can flush unused medicines down the toilet or drain—especially when it comes to environmental harm—can make proper disposal confusing. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommends toilet or drain disposal of a small subset of pain medicines when a drug take-back program is not readily available, primarily due to the risk to human health from accidental exposure or misuse.

In a study recently published in *Pain Medicine*, an interdisciplinary team from the University of Minnesota, Marquette University and the Mayo Clinic reviewed 263 newspaper articles in the United States between January 2014-June 2017 and found the news media frequently did not report the FDA's recommendation.

The study found:

- toilet disposal was presented as a

recommended disposal strategy for unused prescription opioids in just 3.4 percent of articles reviewed on the topic;

- toilet disposal was presented as harmful to the environment in 16 percent of articles reviewed on the topic.

"Patients and [medical providers](#) discussing the proper way to dispose of unused medicines could help save lives by preventing accidental exposure or misuse," said Megan Petrik, an assistant professor in the Medical School and lead author of the study.

"Toilet disposal is an important disposal option for a subset of opioids and we recommend increased communication of this disposal option as recent research by the FDA found negligible ecological harm from opioids on the 'flush list,'" said senior author of the study Benjamin Blair, a postdoctoral associate in the College of Veterinary Medicine.

The team recommends [future research](#) should investigate the barriers to effective communication about disposal options for unused prescription opioids in medical settings as understanding these barriers may help increase patient knowledge of all recommended disposal options.

More information: Megan L Petrik et al. Communication of Recommendations for the Disposal of Unused Prescription Opioid Medications by Stakeholders in the News Media, *Pain Medicine* (2019). [DOI: 10.1093/pm/pnz104](https://doi.org/10.1093/pm/pnz104)

Provided by University of Minnesota

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