How to dispose of empty medication bottles? [1]

Hi Alice!

How do I properly dispose of my empty prescription medication bottles? Can I just throw them in the trash? That seems unsafe since they have my name, but I also throw out junk mail with my name.....

Thanks!

A safe pill-popper

Answer

Dear safe pill-popper,

This is something many people do all the time without thinking twice. Sure, you can throw away your empty medication bottles in the regular trash, but it is highly recommended that you remove any personal information from the bottles before doing so. In the wrong hands, access to your personal health information can enable someone to fill your prescription and even to steal your identity.

Here are some ways you can remove personal information from your medication bottles prior to disposal:

- Scribble over any personal information with a black permanent marker, especially your name, date of birth, your health care provider's name, and the medication type.
- Cover the medication label with a sticker, making sure it is large enough to cover your personal information and that it is securely attached.
- Remove the label entirely. First try to peel it off, and if that doesn't work, it should come off after soaking the bottle. Fill your sink with hot water and put your empty medication bottles in to soak for about 10 minutes. This will loosen the adhesive on the label, making it easier to remove. Once you take the bottles out of the water, use a knife (be careful!) or something similar to scrape off the medication label.
- If you remove the label, make sure to tear it into strips or pieces to further protect your information. Dispose of the pieces in the trash, as well as the pill bottles? both can be thrown away with regular trash or recycled (most are number 5 plastics which can be recycled).
- Occasionally hospitals and recycling centers will hold collection events as a way to safely dispose of medication bottles and unused medications. They will black out or
remove your information from the bottles and dispose of them. Contact your local hospital or recycling center to find out about these events.

- Some pharmacies will also accept old medication bottles and dispose of them properly when you refill prescriptions. Ask your pharmacist when you fill your next prescription.

There are also specific procedures for disposing of medications you no longer need. Do not flush unused medications or pour them down a sink or drain. It is best to place unused medications in a sealable plastic bag with water, which will dissolve the medication. You can also try disposing the medications with kitty litter, sawdust, coffee grounds, or any material that mixes with the medication and makes it less appealing to children and/or pets who may get into the trash. Seal the plastic bag and toss it. Remember to remove all personal information from these bottles as well. Unused medications can also be returned at medicine take-back programs.

By the way, in terms of junk mail, you may also want to shred or scribble out personal information just as a precaution. Hope this helps and great question!

Alice!
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