

THE TABLET: PALLIATIVE CARE PHARMACY TIPS



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If you have a topic you would like the pharmacy team to answer, please send your suggestions to: lowrymf@upmc.edu

TODAY'S TOPIC:

Safe Opioid Disposal Practices

Background:

Safe drug disposal is paramount to patient safety. This is especially the case for controlled substances, such as opioids, to avoid unintentional overdoses or diversion. The US. Department of Justice has a [Resource Page](#) for safe drug disposal.

Importance:

Palliative care clinicians should be aware of the evidence suggesting that our patients do not inherently dispose of unused medications. We can help with this effort when counseling patients on proper disposal and/or storage of high-risk medications such as opioids.

The Literature:

[J Palliat Med. 2023 Jun;26\(6\):816-825.](#)

Opioid disposal practices of patients with life-limiting cancers in an outpatient palliative care clinic: A cross-sectional study

Objective:

- Primary: determine prevalence of outpatient palliative care clinic patients who did not routinely dispose their opioids
- Secondary: examine methods of opioid disposal and to identify patient characteristics associated with routine disposal of opioids

Methods:

- Cross-sectional study with retrospective chart review of new, adult patients seen in outpt PC clinic and completed survey about opioid-related constructs ("opioid Safety Survey") at initial visit including disposal of opioids

Results: n=122, average age 64.5 years old, 96.7% urban residence, 20.5% chronic pain history

- 80.7% reported they were aware of proper disposal methods for opioids
 - o Those who received education from their pharmacists or physicians were more likely to be aware of proper disposal: 100%
- **52.3% (58/111) did not routinely dispose their opioids**
 - o Those who did not routinely dispose of their opioids were more likely to respond that they did not dispose of them in case they needed them in the future: 68.4%
- Most common method of disposal were giving to pharmacists: 78.4% (69/88)
- Cannabis use (OR 3.7, [1.1-11.8]) and neuropathic medication use (OR: 3.0, [1.2-7.2]) were positively associated with routine disposal of opioids
- Increased amount of opioid use in past 6 months were negatively associated with routine disposal of opioids (OR: 3.8 [0.16-0.88])
- 49.6% of patients reported keeping their opioids hidden but not locked

Conclusion: "There is a high prevalence of people with life-limiting illnesses who report that they do not routinely dispose their opioids."

[Oncologist. 2017 Jan;22\(1\):115-121.](#)

The impact of an educational program on patient practices for safe use, storage, and disposal of opioids at a comprehensive cancer center

Objective: to determine whether an improvement had occurred in the patterns of use, storage, and disposal of opioids among cancer outpatients with implementation of a patient educational program

Methods:

- PC clinic provides every patient with educational material (EM) on safe opioid use, storage, and disposal every time they receive an opioid prescription, content based on FDA, EPA and DEA guidelines
- Educational program consists of the EM and personalized education provided by PC staff (nurses, pharmacists, physicians)
- Self-administered survey was provided to eligible patients by research staff, n=300 of those who received educational materials, versus N=300 who did not

Results: n =523 (average age: 55.3 years), 69.5% white, MEDD \geq 100: 41.5%

- In the group that received educational materials:
 - o fewer patients had unused opioids at home (38.1% vs. 46.6%; p = .0497)
 - o more patients kept their opioids in a safe place (locked, 14% vs. 9.5%; hidden, 75.4% vs. 69.9%; p = .0025)
 - o more patients were aware of the proper methods of opioid disposal (76.5% vs. 28%; p < .0001)
 - o less likely to share their opioids with someone else (3% vs. 8%, p=0.311)

Conclusion: "The use of educational materials on opioid safety for patients with advanced cancer was associated with improved patient-reported safe opioid use, storage, and disposal."

Maria's Thoughts & Tips:

- Many of our patients likely have unused opioids or other controlled substances at home – first step is asking about storage and disposal practices!
- Check out this website, it is a great resource and place to print out information to share with patients regarding safe drug disposal (or could refer patients directly here): [US. DOJ Drug Disposal Information](#)
- When education surrounding safe storage and disposal of opioids is incorporated into practice – patients are more likely to engage in safe opioid storage or disposal practices such as keep supply in a hidden, safe place or dispose of unused supply
- Even the FDA suggests flushing medications (like opioids) down the toilet... personally, this practice makes me uncomfortable as medications may still pass through water treatment systems and enter rivers, lakes and community drinking water supplies. Would advise against this disposal method, especially for opioids, and instead encourage the use of drug take back days/public disposal locations.
 - o You can search for year-round controlled substance public disposal locations: [Here](#)
- DEA Drug Takeback Days on select days and locations, more info can be found: [Here](#)

CLINICAL PEARL: It is important to counsel our patients on safe drug disposal methods for unused opioids (or other controlled substances)