

# Frequently Asked Questions: Secure Medicine Return

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Whatcom County Health Department

## Why are leftover and expired medicines a public health problem?

Medicine cabinets provide teens and others with easy access to pharmaceuticals that can be dangerous or deadly if misused. Storing unwanted or expired medicines in our homes contributes to the epidemic of medicine abuse and preventable poisonings in our communities. Improper disposal of medicines down the drain or in the household trash adds to pharmaceutical pollution in the environment, including in Puget Sound and our drinking water sources.

## What are Secure Medicine Return and Pharmaceutical Stewardship?

Medicines cure diseases and help keep us healthy, but to prevent harm, medicines need to be stored safely in the home and disposed of properly when leftover or expired. **Secure medicine return programs** provide a secure and environmentally sound way to dispose of unneeded medicines, and are part of a comprehensive approach to preventing prescription drug abuse.

**Pharmaceutical stewardship** is a policy approach that requires the companies that manufacture medicines to provide a collection and disposal system for waste medicines. While medicine producers have the primary responsibility for pharmaceutical stewardship programs, there are important roles for other stakeholders including pharmacies, hospitals, healthcare providers, and consumers.

## How much medicine is unused, and why?

About 1/3 of medicines sold go unused and need to be safely disposed of to protect our families and our environment. In a recent Whatcom County survey, 57% of respondents reported having unused, expired or unwanted medicines in their homes. Some of the reasons this occurs are:

- A large amount of medicine is needed for a serious illness or end of life care, and the patient recovers or passes away
- Prescribed medicines are changed because the patient has a bad reaction or to find the best course of treatment
- “As needed” medicines expire before they are used
- Medicine is overprescribed or excess over-the-counter medicines are purchased
- People choose to discontinue the use of their medication

## What local action is under consideration?

At the request of the Whatcom County Health Board, the Health Department is preparing legislation that will establish a convenient county-wide medicine return system for residents to securely dispose of leftover and unwanted medicine. The regulation would be modeled after the Secure Medicine Return Regulations enacted in King, Snohomish, Kitsap and Pierce counties that require pharmaceutical manufacturers to finance and coordinate the secure medicine return system.

### The proposed policy would:

- **Expand secure medicine disposal options for Whatcom county residents** to reduce risks of medicine poisonings, misuse, and environmental pollution.
- **Improve convenience for residents by expanding the number of secure drop box locations in the county**, including at local pharmacies and medical centers.
- **Provide prepaid return mailers** for homebound residents and others who don't have access to drop box locations.
- **Ensure financial sustainability** through a pharmaceutical manufacturer-financed system.

## Isn't there already a medicine return program in Whatcom County?

There are some medicine collection sites currently in Whatcom County. These programs are very successful and have collected over 14,000 pounds of medicines since 2010. However, these programs are voluntary and inconsistently funded, so not all areas of the county have medicine collection sites. In addition, most locations *do not accept* prescription drugs that are controlled substances, like OxyContin, Vicodin, and Adderall.

Current drop box locations that accept all medicines, including controlled substances, are the Bellingham Police Department, the Ferndale Police Department, and one Bellingham pharmacy. Five pharmacies in Bellingham and one pharmacy in Ferndale accept most medicines but do not accept controlled substances. While current law allows pharmacies to accept narcotic pain relievers and other prescribed controlled substances for safe disposal, the special requirements for this waste make it more expensive to manage than non-controlled substances.

Our existing medicine return programs and events are limited in their services. More resources are needed to:

- expand the number of conveniently-located collection sites,
- collect controlled substances at all locations,
- provide alternative collection methods in locations without drop boxes, and
- adequately fund and promote the program.

## How much will the county-wide medicine return program cost?

Under the proposed regulation, medicine producers would be required to finance the program as a cost of doing business. There would be no direct cost to consumers to use the medicine return program.

Depending on program design and the amount of medicines collected, the cost to medicine producers is likely to be a few pennies per prescription or bottle of over-the-counter medicines. The pharmaceutical industry has estimated program costs of about \$1.2 million per year under a similar law in Alameda County, CA, which has roughly seven times the population of Whatcom County. This works out to a cost to the producers of less than 0.1% of medicines sales in Whatcom County. This is a small amount compared to the societal costs of substance abuse, poisonings, and overdose deaths.

## How will the program be designed?

The secure medicine return regulation will define performance requirements for the program, such as providing convenient drop boxes throughout the county, secure procedures, safe disposal, and effective education. Medicine producers will develop a stewardship plan explaining how they propose to meet the performance requirements. Producers can develop agreements with pharmacies, hospitals, disposal facilities, and other service providers to accomplish the program goals.

## What other counties have passed secure medicine return laws?

In Washington State, the Boards of Health in four counties – King, Snohomish, Kitsap, and Pierce – have passed similar local regulations. In California, eight counties have passed similar laws, including Alameda County and the City and County of San Francisco. A stewardship organization called MED-Project LLC is developing and operating secure medicine return programs on behalf of more than 400 pharmaceutical companies in these counties (see <https://med-project.org/locations>).

On behalf of drug manufacturers, MED-Project is providing 99 secure drop boxes in King County and at least 31 drop boxes in Snohomish County at participating drug stores, grocery stores with pharmacies, clinics, and hospitals.

