Self-Care Corner

Bad medicine:
the problem with expired medications

It's 10 pm, you've got a horrible headache, and the only pain reliever you've found expired a year ago. Can you use it just this once?

No, you shouldn't, according to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Once medicines have expired, there's no guarantee that they're safe – or that they'll work.

Using an expired medicine puts you at risk of having a bad reaction or having the medication not work at all. If it's past the expiration date, discard it safely. Make sure kids and pets cannot get to it.

Tips to avoid medication mishaps

- Go through your medicine cabinet every six months. Discard expired medications or anything that has an unusual odor or appearance.

- Don't keep medicines in your bathroom. The steam from your bath or shower can make them go bad even before they've expired. Instead, keep them out of reach of children in a bedroom, linen closet, or kitchen cabinet.

- If you have children in the house, consider a locked cabinet for medicines. Some pills look like "candy" to kids, and many children have been poisoned by ingesting medicines and vitamins.

How to discard unused medicines

Some medicines come with disposal instructions. If not, the FDA recommends most medicines be safely placed in your regular trash. Here's how to do it:

- Put the pills in a sealed plastic bag with other trash like kitty litter, used coffee grounds, or even dirt. This helps prevent others from trying to take the medicine.

- If you're throwing out prescription bottles, scratch out all the information on the label. This includes your name and the name of the medication.

- Check with your city or town about an authorized drug take-back program. These programs allow you to get rid of old medicines safely.

- A few medicines should be flushed down the sink or toilet because they can be dangerous to others if found in the garbage. Check the FDA website (www.fda.gov) for a list of these medicines.