

Is It OK to Take Expired Medications?

By Michele Bender

Your head's pounding, so you reach into your medicine cabinet for a pain reliever. You take a look at the label and see that the expiration date has come and gone.

Now, you've got a choice: pop the expired pill or toss away what may be perfectly good medication.

This dilemma can happen with any medication, but especially for those used on an as-needed basis.

So what does the expiration date really mean? Do medications become unsafe with age or just ineffective?

"The FDA requires a lot number and expiration date on over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription brand-name drugs," explains pharmacologist Joe Graedon, author of the best-selling *People's Pharmacy* books. After the expiration date, the manufacturer no longer guarantees that medication is 100 percent effective. But that doesn't mean it won't work. And almost never do medications become unsafe with age, although ineffectiveness itself can become a safety issue.

"Unfortunately, it's a much more complicated question than you would think," says Graedon.

OTC drugs generally are effective long after the expiration date. "With OTC medications there's usually a fudge factor," explains Graedon.

"Drug companies usually build in several months if not years. In other words, the medication doesn't instantly go bad the day

after its expiration date."

However, when it does go bad depends on the chemical structure of the medication and how it's stored, among other things. For example, if you keep a bottle of Advil in your car's glove compartment it's going to deteriorate faster than if you stored it in a kitchen drawer.

Expiration vs. Discard Date

Prescriptions are another story. "If you get a brand-name prescription drug in its original bottle made by the manufacturer, it will have an expiration date that's around six to 18 months from the day you pick it up in the pharmacy," says Graedon. But if you get a generic version of your medication in a standard issue bottle from the pharmacy, it has a discard date.

"This is generally one year from the day it was dispensed," explains Graedon. "And it may bear no resemblance to the actual expiration date. It may be shorter or it may be longer."

For medications you take daily, this usually isn't a problem. But for taken-as-needed prescriptions, it's a good idea to ask the pharmacist for the original expiration date and write it on the bottle.

Liquids Spoil Faster

Liquid medications — like a nasal spray or cough medicine — or creams tend to be more worrisome than pills or tablets. Liquids and creams are made with preservatives, which are necessary to maintain the medications

stability and keep it from spoiling. "Here, it's important to pay attention to the expiration date because it's probably a more significant and reliable measure," adds Graedon.

The bottom line? No medications go bad on the expiration date. "There have been a number of studies showing that many drugs will often last past the expiration date," says Graedon.

Unfortunately, there's no magic number of days after the expiration date where a medicine is still good. "Three weeks after the expiration date is probably fine. Three months or three years? I'm not so sure," says Graedon. "There's no rule of thumb, but to be super cautious, stop using any medication within a few weeks after the expiration date."

Storing your medication properly will help extend its shelf life. Though it's called the "medicine cabinet," this actually isn't the best place for these items. "The bathroom gets hot and humid, so medicine can break down," explains Graedon. Instead, store them in a cool, dry area away from sunlight or children.

And the cotton ball that comes with some pills? Throw it away. It absorbs moisture, which can increase the product's deterioration. If possible, keep drugs in their original bottles and put these in an airtight container.

To be safe, never use a medication that smells funny, appears crumbly or crystallized, has changed color or has anything about it that doesn't look right.