

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

What to do with old prescription drugs? Four O.C. Walgreens will be take-back sites for medications

By [JENNA CHANDLER](#)

2016-02-22 16:37:04



Walgreens will soon give Orange County residents their best option to jettison prescription drugs from medicine cabinets.

For those who bother to get rid of unwanted or expired medications, options have mostly been limited to either tossing them in household trash or flushing them down the toilet, which is legal but discouraged because it could pollute the local water supply.

Now Walgreens is the first large U.S. pharmacy chain to offer a more environmentally friendly alternative.

The chain was recently licensed to install mailbox-type kiosks at four of its 24-hour drugstores in Orange County. The kiosks will be secure, so people can't improperly get their hands on the valuable medications. Walgreens wouldn't say how the medications it collects will be destroyed, but it will likely be by incineration.

It's the first large pharmacy chain to take advantage of a two-year-old Drug Enforcement Administration rule that allows pharmacists to take back the drugs they dispense after receiving authorization. The changes were at first heralded as a major step forward in combating the prescription drug and heroin epidemic. Many heroin addicts first get hooked on prescription opiates before seeking a cheaper, more potent high.

But many pharmacists said they were deterred in earning the DEA authorization because of security risks and red tape.

"Unless you have a couple of attorneys working for you to fill out the paperwork and go through all of the hoops, it's unbelievable," said Jerry Medley, who co-owns Sea View Pharmacy in San Clemente.

Medley said he turns away a couple of people each week who are looking to get rid of their prescription drugs.

Doctors write enough prescriptions for painkillers for every adult in the U.S. to have one bottle of pills. That estimate from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention doesn't include the other types of drugs doctors prescribe for conditions such as anxiety and depression (think Xanax and Valium) and that people abuse.

Many patients stash them before their treatment has run its course, saving them for future use and allowing them to pile up at home, where they can become easy scores for brazen teenagers, friends and relatives.

"A medicine cabinet is no longer a safe place for anybody to store certain prescription medications," said Aimee Dunkle, whose son Ben Dunkle died at age 20 of a heroin overdose.

Ben, a Tesoro High School graduate, started using prescription drugs, including Xanax, as a teenager. Aimee's husband once caught one of their son's friends rifling through their medicine cabinet, she said.

"This kid knew exactly what he was looking for."

For that reason, law enforcement and public health officials urge people to destroy the medications.

But they haven't made it easy, with conflicting advice on how to dispose of the drugs. The Santa Margarita Water District has a receptacle for prescription drugs, but not controlled substances – [drugs deemed by the](#)

[government as having the potential for abuse](#). The Orange County Sheriff's Department accepts controlled substances, but only in pill form.

"I get calls from Orange County all the time. Nurses, drug prevention community, parents – they're all trying to figure out what to do," said Heidi Sanborn, executive director of the California Product Stewardship Council, which has worked with counties in Northern California to enact ordinances mandating that drug companies pay for and manage take-back programs.

Her group surveyed 1,700 people in Northern California to find out how they're getting rid of their drugs.

"They go to pharmacies, they get turned away. One person buried the drugs out in the backyard, then watched squirrels dig it up," Sanborn said. "It's unbelievable what we're hearing. People are frustrated. The public is yearning for convenient locations."

Contact the writer: jchandler@ocregister.com and [@jennakchandler](#) on Twitter

© Copyright 2016 Freedom Communications. All Rights Reserved.

[Privacy Policy](#) | [User Agreement](#) | [Site Map](#)