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## Safe to take expired prescription medication? <sup>[1]</sup>

Hi Alice,

I wanted to know the dangers of taking expired pills. For instance, Xanax that expired over five years ago. I'm sure you're wondering why someone would still have them but I am curious what would happen if you took them now.

Thank you,  
Diney

### **Answer**

Dear Diney,

With all the different labeling on products now — best by, sell by, use by, and more — it's easy to be confused by expiration dates. Although in *some* cases medication is still safe after the expiration date, prescription and non-prescription medicines are only guaranteed to be safe and at full potency up until the expiration date listed on the bottle. You specifically mentioned expired alprazolam (the generic name for Xanax) in your question. Disposing of alprazolam that is either expired or no longer needed is typically recommended. There are a number of ways to dispose of medicines (more on that in a bit). Your best bet is to refrain from using the expired medication and consult your health care provider for a new prescription.

So, more about expiration dates: Because manufacturers must be absolutely certain that the drugs will be at full strength up until the expiration date, the expiration date is often conservative. The result of a conservative expiration date is that some medications do stay potent and safe beyond that date. Some studies have looked at expired medicine to see just how long different types will last beyond their expiration date. Although evidence supports the fact that certain medications retain their power long beyond the expiration date, it's good to note that the studies tested medication that was stored in ideal conditions (in some cases, the medicine bottles had never been opened at all before testing). It's also helpful to remember that research hasn't been done on every type of medication available and that some expired medications have been shown to be risky to consume beyond the expiration date, so caution is still recommended.

So, how can you store your medication in the best way possible? If the medication looks or

smells a bit off in any way — including before the expiration date — check with your health care provider to see if these observed changes might be a sign that it's no longer safe to use .

Time to toss the meds? The [U.S. Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\)](#) [2] recommends taking the following steps to properly get rid of expired medications:

- Check the medication's label for instructions on how to dispose of that medication specifically.
- If no specific instructions are given, look for a government-run drug take-back program in your area. The [U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration \(DEA\)](#) [3] lists collection sites available to the public.
- If no drug take-back options are available near you, some medications can be thrown away in the trash. Putting the unused medicine mixed with an unappealing substance (such as coffee grounds) into a plastic bag before throwing it away with the other garbage is recommended. Avoid crushing pills when mixed with the coffee grounds or other substance.
- Before throwing any medicine away, check to make sure it's not on the FDA's list of medications that are better flushed down the toilet than thrown away. It's also a good idea to block out any personal information on medication labels before throwing away the bottles, either by scraping off the label or scribbling over it with a permanent marker.

*List adapted from the FDA's [Disposal of Unused Medicines: What You Should Know](#) [4].*

In addition to considering whether or not the drugs are still effective, it's key to determine whether the drugs are still appropriate to take for a given condition if they have been around long enough to expire. For example, while the alprazolam may still be potent, it may not be an appropriate drug to take years later without the guidance and prescription from a health care provider. Additionally, having old medicines around could put others at risk, especially as prescription misuse and abuse has increased in the United States.

At the end of the day, when it comes to putting medication in the body, it's better to be safe than sorry. If you believe you may benefit from a particular drug, talking to your health care provider about getting a prescription is the way to make sure the medication you take will be both potent and safe.

Alice!

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[2] <http://www.fda.gov/forconsumers/consumerupdates/ucm101653.htm>

[3] [http://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug\\_disposal/takeback/index.html](http://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug_disposal/takeback/index.html)

[4] <http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/EnsuringSafeUseofMedicine/Safe>

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