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It's hot here — Where can I store my medication? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

Recently, I was reading the fine print on the box and saw that it said, "Don't store above 25 degrees Celsius (77 degrees Fahrenheit)." Here, the ambient temperature is normally 35-40 degrees! (I don't have air conditioning). I looked online and the internet said you shouldn't stick pills in the refrigerator because of the moisture.

What is my best option for storing the medication?

Thank you,

JZ

Answer

Dear JZ,

Taking medication as prescribed can sometimes be a challenge on its own without adding tropical temperatures into the mix! Your internet search did provide you with some good information — the moist environment in refrigerators can certainly damage some medications. What's more, storing meds in the refrigerator might also damage some drugs that are sensitive to very cold temperatures. Given that you were able to catch that the storage recommendations for your medication don't quite mesh with the conditions you're dealing with, it might be a good idea to consult with your pharmacist or health care provider — they'll be your go-to for advice on the best way to store your specific medication. Keep reading for general information on troubleshooting proper and safe storage for medications.

As you already mentioned, both prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) drugs typically come with storage recommendations and expiration dates. This is because medications can degrade over time and more rapidly in certain conditions. Some drugs can lose effectiveness from inappropriate storage, which can be a serious problem for those that require exact dosing to manage health conditions — such as insulin for diabetes or anticonvulsants for seizures. Other meds can break down and impact you in other ways. For example, hot temperatures and high humidity can degrade aspirin into acetic acid (vinegar) and salicylic acid, both of which are

stomach irritants. With some medications, such as tetracycline (an antibiotic), it can even become toxic when improperly stored. All this is to say, storage conditions definitely matter!

Generally, there are three main considerations for storing medications: avoiding extreme temperatures (both too hot and too cold), being aware of humidity or moisture, and avoiding direct exposure to light. Many warmer environments, such as the one you live in, may also have higher humidity relative to other climates. Because of this, damage to certain medications due to moisture may be a concern, even for room temperature storage. If you can, try to store your medication in an area with adequate ventilation or air circulation (especially if you don't have air conditioning) to prevent the accumulation of excess moisture.

The following are some additional considerations for storing medications:

- Carefully read (and keep!) the manufacturer's packaging and any inserts or pamphlets for each medication; review the medication label for storage instructions and warnings.
- Take a look at the original appearance of your medicine and don't take it if the color, smell, or texture changes over time. If you do notice anything unusual, it's good practice to toss it, even if it's well before the printed expiration date. Contact your pharmacist or health care provider to properly dispose of and replace the damaged medication or to ask any questions if you aren't sure.
- Try ordering smaller amounts of your medication more frequently (for example, a one month's worth of the prescription, rather than a three-month supply) so you don't have to store it for very long.
- If you have multiple containers or vials of the same medication, only open one at a time; this will help you use up medication before it expires and reduce the chance of accidentally storing it inappropriately.
- Consider storing medicine in its original packaging in the back of a closet, or another cool and dark space, away from direct sunlight, and out of the reach of children.
- While bathroom cabinets or kitchen pantries and cupboards may seem like a convenient storage location, the temperatures in these rooms can fluctuate often and tend to get warm and humid, so try to avoid such storage locations.
- Throw out the cotton ball from the medication container (if you found one in the container when you first opened it). Not only does it make it difficult to access your medicine, it can also attract excess moisture.
- When traveling via plane, pack your medicine as carry-on luggage instead of in your checked bag to avoid temperature fluctuations. When driving, avoid keeping medicine in the trunk or the glove compartment as it can get hot. Once you get to your destination, be sure to store your medication as indicated as soon as possible.

Keep in mind that these suggestions are just the first steps in making sure that the medications you take are both effective and safe. Have you tried contacting your local pharmacist or health care provider for advice? They might be able to give you more specific instructions, or even suggest an alternative medication similar to the one you currently use that might be more stable and amenable to storage in warmer conditions.

Lastly, it might also be helpful to remember that the storage environment isn't just a concern for pill bottles — creams, ointments, suppositories, and liquid medications can also be susceptible to

damage due to improper or unsuitable storage conditions. Additionally, items with latex (such as gloves and condoms), electronic medical equipment, or devices with batteries, internal circuits, screens, etc., also have recommended storage conditions that are critical to their utility. Keeping their storage needs in mind as well can help ensure that they're most effective when they're used!

Alice!

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