

COVID-19: Guidance on dealing with patient-returned / unwanted medicines (England)

The National Pharmacy Association (NPA), the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee (PSNC), Community Pharmacy Patient Safety Group (CP PSG) and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society (RPS) have jointly produced this guidance for community pharmacies in England. (May 2020)

Introduction

Community pharmacies routinely accept unwanted/out-of-date/waste medicines for disposal from patients and households, as this is an NHS contractual requirement. This service has not been suspended during the current coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

For patient safety reasons, it is important that patients and households remain able to return unwanted medicines to the pharmacy for disposal during the COVID-19 pandemic, to avoid the potential risk of accidents, overdoses and misuse.

Balancing NHS contractual requirements versus health and safety of patients and pharmacy teams

Safeguarding patient/public safety and that of the pharmacy team is of paramount importance. Both factors need to be considered when making a decision about whether your pharmacy can safely accept unwanted medicines for disposal at any specific point in time. If the pharmacy's waste medicines bins are full, you should inform the regional NHS England and NHS Improvement (NHSE&I) team, asking them to arrange for the bins to be collected as soon as possible. If due to a lack of waste medicines bins it is not possible to store returned unwanted medicines in a safe manner, the contractor will need to temporarily stop accepting returned medicines until NHSE&I arrange for a waste collection from the pharmacy.

Community pharmacy teams have understandably expressed concerns about the potential for infection from unwanted medicines returned to the pharmacy for disposal, where the patient may have/had coronavirus (COVID-19). However, the pharmacy also has a duty of care to support patient safety and accept unwanted medicines back for disposal in as safe a manner as possible. In the current pandemic, this means implementing additional steps to minimise the risk of infection from returned medicines both to those seeking to return the unwanted medicines and the pharmacy team.

This guidance is to help community pharmacy teams safely handle returned unwanted medicines and includes advice for patients on how best to do this during the pandemic. It is based on the current best information on how long COVID-19 survives on surfaces.

Key points about COVID-19 transmission

- Coronavirus (COVID-19) is transmitted primarily through respiratory droplets generated by coughing and sneezing, and through contact with contaminated surfaces.
- Evidence indicates that COVID 19 survives on different surfaces for different lengths of time.
- Human coronaviruses can survive on inanimate objects, possibly remaining viable for up to 5 days at temperatures of 22-25°C and relative humidity of 40-50% (which is the typical air-conditioned indoor environment).

Considerations

Pharmacy teams should consider the following before accepting unwanted medicines:

- Accept unwanted medicines brought to the pharmacy only if you can do so safely
 - Ensure all staff understand how to handle unwanted medicines to minimise any risk.
 - Check if there is space to store the unwanted medicines within the pharmacy – most importantly, enough waste medicines bins (DOOP bins).
 - Confirm whether the waste contractor is still collecting the stored waste bins, and if so, how often.
 - Do not store unwanted medicines in any other container other than the waste medicines bins.



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- If unwanted medicines cannot be accepted, because your pharmacy's waste medicines bins are full, inform the regional NHSE&I team. The pharmacy will need to temporarily stop accepting returned medicines, until NHSE&I arrange for a waste collection from the pharmacy.
- Be mindful of the sensitivity of the situation when some medicines are returned, e.g. following the death of the patient. If you are unable to accept the unwanted medicines, sensitively offer suggestions on safe storage at home until the pharmacy is able to accept returned medicines:
 - Do not put in the normal household rubbish or pour down the drain.
 - Store the unwanted medicines securely in a labelled box or sealed bag.
 - Keep the sealed, labelled medicines out of sight and reach of children and vulnerable individuals, and away from medicines currently in use.
 - Consider storing the labelled waste medicines in a garage or attic until it can be returned to the pharmacy.
 - Do not leave near heat sources or running water.
- Some patients/representatives may ask the pharmacy to collect unwanted medicines. Collection of unwanted medicines from a patient's home is not an NHS contractual requirement, so you do not need to provide such a service to patients. A waste carrier's licence is required to transport unwanted medicines.

Suggested procedure for managing unwanted medicines returned to the pharmacy

Treat all unwanted medicines returned to the pharmacy as potentially contaminated with coronavirus (COVID-19).

1. Maintain social distancing of at least 2 metres between the patient/representative and yourself.
2. Staff should follow Public Health England (PHE) guidance on the wearing of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).
3. Ask the patient/representative to open the bag and confirm if there are any Controlled Drugs (CDs), cytotoxic medicines or sharps in the bag.
4. Make a visual check of the contents to confirm there are no CDs, cytotoxic medicines or sharps in it. Try not touch or handle the bag directly where possible, simply peer into the bag to check.
5. If CDs, cytotoxic medicines or sharps are present, ask the patient/representative to remove them from the bag, and ask them to place these into separate plastic bags you provide.
6. For all other items, ask the patient/representative to place the bag into another bag so that the unwanted medicines are double bagged.
7. Place the "double bagged," returned medicines directly into the waste medicines bin.
8. For CDs: double bag the CDs and place them in the CD cabinet for 5 days before denaturing as per the usual pharmacy process. If there is insufficient space in the CD cabinet to store the returned CDs, you may consider storing the double-bagged returned CDs in alternative secure, lockable storage and manage the key in-line with the CD SOP.
9. For cytotoxic medicines: ask the patient/representative to place them into another bag so that the unwanted cytotoxic medicines are double-bagged. Double bag the cytotoxic/cytostatic medicines and place directly into the separate hazardous waste bin.
10. For sharps: unless the sharps are part of a needle & syringe programme and there is NHS provision for the pharmacy to accept it back for disposal, ask the patient/representative to take the sharps back home with them and arrange for it to be collected for disposal by the local council.
11. Follow general hand hygiene measures at all stages to minimise risk of infection. Wear gloves if available remembering not to touch your face with gloved hands.
12. Clean and disinfect all affected surfaces.
13. Dispose of PPE in line with agreed guidance

Note

There is no legal requirement for patient labels to be removed from the packaging of unwanted medicines before being placed in the waste medicines bin for disposal. Patients can remove labels before returning the meds to the pharmacy. To minimise the risk to staff, we do not recommend pharmacy teams try to remove dispensing labels or obscure patient names on them in other ways at this time.

