

Pharmaceuticals & Sharps

The Problem

According to [leading data sources](#), approximately \$360 billion in prescription drugs were prescribed in the U.S. in 2019. A leading [pharmaceutical expert](#) estimated that \$5 billion worth of prescribed medicines are thrown away each year in the U.S. With a lack of safe and secure disposal options, consumers traditionally have had the option of trashing, flushing, or storing these medicines at home. Each of these options have [harmful](#) side effects. Numerous studies have documented the widespread consequences of improperly stored and disposed medicines, including impacts on water quality and public health.

On the other hand, an [estimated](#) 936 million needles are used by self-injectors in California each year. By law, used sharps must be placed in puncture-proof bio-hazard containers and disposed at a designated disposal site. Throwing away used medical sharps in the trash, recycling bin, or flushing them down the toilet is [illegal \(SB 1305, 2006\)](#), as it poses serious health risks to children, sanitation workers, water treatment facility operators, and the general public.



Many sharps are improperly disposed of and enter the waste or recycling stream where they pose a danger to everyone involved. A sharps injury - a cut or puncture wound resulting in penetration of the skin by a hypodermic needle, surgical blade, fragment of glass or metal or other sharp item including rigid plastic - is the primary hazard for those working with healthcare waste. Though much attention is paid to the safety of healthcare, the welfare and safety of those in the waste disposal sector has received very little attention. No comprehensive report exists to define the incidence of sharps injuries to this specific worker group. A 2018 [study](#) by Environmental Research and Education Foundation and the Solid Waste Association of North America (SWANA) found that 4% of MRF (Material Recovery Facility) workers reported needle stick injuries and 95% of people improperly dispose of sharps.

To learn more about the problems caused by improper disposal of pharmaceuticals and other health products such as sharps, read CPSC's "A Prescription for Change" publications below.

- [Sacramento County](#) - Spring 2014
- [Marin County](#) - Fall/Winter 2014
- [San Mateo](#) - Spring/Summer 2015
- [Alameda County](#) - Spring 2016
- [Santa Clara](#) - Spring 2016
- [Butte & Tehama Counties](#) - Fall 2016
- [San Joaquin County](#) - Summer 2018

The Solution – Extended Producer Responsibility

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) laws requiring that pharmaceutical manufacturers manage their products' waste at end-of-life have been implemented throughout the world. To

comply with such legislation pharmaceutical manufacturers and others in the product chain will design, manage and fund take-back programs to collect unwanted medicines and sometimes their packaging from the public and ensure the collected materials are properly managed. In 2018, CPSC sponsored [SB 212 \(Jackson\)](#) which passed and brought the nation's first EPR program for both medicine and sharps together.

[Read the entire story of SB 212](#) - bringing producer funded medicine and sharps disposal to California.

Voluntary Pharmaceutical Stewardship

Walgreens Leads National Chains on Medication Take Back

In 2016 Walgreens became the first retailer to implement an ongoing national stewardship program by installing safe medication disposal kiosks in more than 600 drugstores in 45 states and Washington, D.C. to make the disposal of medications easier and more convenient. This included opioids and other controlled substances, reducing the misuse of medications and rise in overdose deaths. To date they have collected over 72 tons of meds! In a Walgreens [press release](#) announcing the program, Richard Ashworth, Walgreens president of pharmacy and retail operations said “Walgreens pharmacists play an important role in counseling patients on the safe use of their medications, and now we are leading the way in retail pharmacy’s fight against prescription drug abuse.”

Don't Rush to Flush, Meds in the Bin We All Win! Medicine Collection Program



CPSC received a grant from the [Rose Foundation](#) to establish a medication collection program in Sacramento and Yolo counties in July 2013. The resulting program, named “Don’t Rush to Flush, Meds in the Bin We All Win!” (DRTF) established six permanent medication sites available to the public free of charge in Sacramento and Yolo counties and has since expanded to Contra Costa, Santa Clara, and Madera counties. DRTF is being licensed and sold to communities across the country. Visit www.dontrushtoflush.org for more information.

California Drug Take-Back Program

Funded by the California Department of Health Care Services' MAT Expansion Project and developed and administered in partnership with CPSC, this program's goal is to increase the disposal of unwanted medicines across the state of California. Collection bins have been and continue to be placed throughout the state for the express purpose of disposing of unwanted medicines. If you represent a pharmacy, hospital, or police department and are interested in hosting a bin, please [click](#) here to start the application process. Learn more [here](#).



Safely Dispose of Your Medications

- [CalRecycle](#) – Statewide
- [Don't Flush Your Meds](#) by Regional San – Sacramento Region
- [Earth 911](#) – Nationwide

Research & Relevant Articles

- [Help Ensure Proper Medication Storage and Disposal](#) – Pharmacy Times, 9/28/21
- [California Significantly Expands Medication Take-Back Bin Network](#) – CPSC, 4/8/21
- [California Readies for Statewide Extended Producer Responsibility for Pharma Waste](#), – Lexology, 4/4/19
- [A diverse suite of pharmaceuticals contaminates stream and riparian food webs](#) – Nature Communications, September 2018
- [Combating the opioid crisis with drug takeback programs](#) – American Public Works Association Reporter, 3/18
- [Survey of Downtown San Francisco Reveals Trash on Every Block 303 Piles of Feces and 100 Drug Needles](#) – NBC Bay Area, 2/18/2018
- [Household Needles in Municipal Solid Waste \(MSW\): Policy, Controls, and Material Recovery Facility \(MRF\) Safety](#) – Environmental Research and Education Foundation, 2018
- [California State Auditor's Report: Home-Generated Sharps and Pharmaceutical Waste](#) – May 2017
 - [CPSC's Summary of Auditor's Issues and Our Response](#) – September 2017
- [Recycling is in trouble and you may be part of the problem](#) – USA TODAY, 4/20/2017

Links

- [CPSC Sharps Stewardship Playlist](#)
- [Drug Take-Back Program Summary Supplement](#)
- [California Senate Bill 1305 \(2006\) – Disposal of Home-Generated Sharps Waste](#)
- [CalRecycle Sharps Information Webpage](#)
- [Safe Needle Disposal](#)
- [Alameda County Department of Environmental Health Safe Drug Disposal](#)
- [Alameda County Medicine Education Disposal Safety \(MEDS\) Coalition website](#)
- [King County Secure Medicine Return Program website](#)
- [King County Secure Medicine Return Rule and Regulation website](#)
- [Los Angeles County Department of Public Health Pharmaceutical Take-Back website](#)
- [Product Stewardship Organizations and Consultants](#)