

Handle Pharmaceutical Waste Properly

This guidance is for clinics and health care facilities that must deal with waste pharmaceuticals and regulated medical waste.

Most waste pharmaceuticals are considered dangerous waste. They are toxic, corrosive, or reactive, and can create a serious risk to human health or the environment. Sending the waste to a dangerous waste disposal facility so it can be incinerated is the safest way to handle it.

Dangerous waste pharmaceuticals cannot be disposed in sharps containers or red bags. Those are strictly intended to collect biomedical waste (also called “regulated medical waste”). Biomedical waste is regulated by the Washington Department of Health. It is most often simply sent to a landfill after being microwaved, autoclaved, or bleached to sterilize it. Biomedical waste isn’t treated to remove toxicity or other dangerous characteristics, and that’s why it shouldn’t be mixed with pharmaceutical waste.

Keys to Safe Disposal of Pharmaceutical Waste

- *NEVER put dangerous waste pharmaceuticals into sharps containers or red bags.* This violates the state’s dangerous waste regulations and does not meet the standards of the [Interim Enforcement Policy](#).¹ Mixing pharmaceutical wastes with regulated medical waste also presents a problem for your waste hauler, the biomedical receiving facility, and the landfill. Don’t place them, the public, or the environment at risk by mixing dangerous waste pharmaceuticals into red bags or sharps containers.
- ONLY place “empty” syringes and vials into the sharps container if they contained pharmaceuticals that would be considered dangerous.
- Determine which pharmaceutical wastes are dangerous and keep them separate from other wastes.
- Segregate dangerous wastes based on the risk (corrosive, ignitable, reactive, or toxic), and properly dispose of these wastes.

¹ <https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/publications/SummaryPages/0704024.html>

Why It Matters

Pharmaceuticals are powerful compounds with many beneficial effects. They help people stay healthy and cope with illness when they do get sick. However, these drugs can have harmful effects on the environment. Pharmaceutical use in the general population is growing, so more unwanted drugs are disposed, increasing environmental concerns.

- Scientists worldwide are now detecting pharmaceuticals in soil and water.
- Researchers suspect that some types of pharmaceuticals found in the water can affect wildlife.
- Trace amounts of pharmaceuticals have been found in municipal drinking water sources.
- Wastewater treatment plants do not effectively eliminate pharmaceutical compounds.
- The short and long-term health effects on people are not yet known.

We can prevent pharmaceutical waste from contaminating our water and land by disposing of them properly.

Contact Information

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Special Accommodations

To request materials in a format for the visually impaired, visit ecology.wa.gov/accessibility, call Ecology at 360-407-6700, Relay Service 711, or TTY 877-833-6341.



Figure 1. Segregate pharmaceutical waste from other medical waste and use separate bins for different types.

Learn more:

- Ecology publication 07-04-024: [Interim Enforcement Policy – Pharmaceutical Waste](https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/publications/SummaryPages/0704024.html)²
- Ecology publication 07-04-025: [Guide for Dangerous Pharmaceutical Waste Generators in Washington State](https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/publications/SummaryPages/0704025.html)³
- Ecology's website, [Managing Pharmaceutical Waste](http://ecology.wa.gov/pharmawaste)⁴
- [Definition of biomedical wastes – RCW 70.95.K](http://apps.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=70.95K)⁵

² <https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/publications/SummaryPages/0704024.html>

³ <https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/publications/SummaryPages/0704025.html>

⁴ <http://ecology.wa.gov/pharmawaste>

⁵ <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=70.95K.010>