PRESCRIPTION OPIOIDS
Patient Options for Safe and Effective Disposal of Unused Opioids

What GAO Found

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommend that patients dispose of unused prescription opioids by bringing them to DEA-registered collection sites or a DEA take-back event, or using mail-back programs. As of April 2019, 70 percent of the U.S. population lived less than 5 miles from permanent collection sites, which are often located at pharmacies. If collection sites, take-back events, or mail-back programs are not feasible, FDA recommends quickly and permanently removing the most dangerous prescription opioids, such as hydrocodone and fentanyl, from the home by flushing them down the toilet. For all other prescription opioids, the agencies recommend disposal in the trash after mixing them with unpalatable substances, such as cat litter. Commercial products to facilitate in-home disposal also exist, and FDA is aware that patients may opt to use these products for disposal in the trash.

FDA Recommendations for Disposal of Unused Prescription Opioids

Available studies suggest that many patients are unaware of federally recommended disposal methods or choose not to dispose of unused prescription opioids. For example, five studies found that between one-quarter and three-quarters of patients stored unused opioids for future use or had misplaced their unused opioids. Further, federal data indicate that 85 percent of intentional misuse occurs with the patient’s knowledge—for example, when a patient sells or gives away unused prescription opioids. To educate and motivate patients to dispose of unused opioids, FDA launched a public awareness campaign called “Remove the Risk” in April 2019. Also, FDA and other stakeholders have created educational materials for patients and providers on safe opioid disposal.