Reducing waste medicines

Part of a series of guides for pharmacists and pharmacy technicians

Educational solutions for the NHS pharmacy workforce
About this guide to reducing waste medicines

A waste medicine can be defined as any medicine that is prescribed and dispensed, but not taken correctly to achieve the intended therapeutic outcome. These can be medicines that patients do not take at all, but also include medicines that patients take infrequently or not as intended, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

The purpose of this guide is to help pharmacists and pharmacy technicians to contribute to reducing waste medicines in the NHS. It will help you to identify where medicines waste occurs, the reasons why medicines are wasted and how pharmacy teams can contribute to tackling this problem. This guide will signpost you to the most appropriate resources to support your learning. We have also included examples of good practice in reducing waste medicines. The aim of these examples is to illustrate how pharmacy teams in other areas have implemented changes to their practice to reduce waste medicines and to help you consider how you can do the same.

This guide does not cover the destruction and disposal requirements for managing waste medicines. This is an essential service within the community pharmacy contract and therefore an issue you should already be familiar with. If you need to update your knowledge of this essential service visit the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee’s (PSNC) website: www.psnc.org.uk and follow the link to Pharmacy Contract & Services, select Essential Services and then click on the link beneath Disposal of Unwanted Medicines.

Why should you learn about reducing waste medicines?

The Department of Heath suggests that in England alone, waste medicines cost the NHS £300 million each year and around half of this waste is avoidable.¹ Once dispensed, any medicines that are returned to pharmacies cannot be reused. These must be destroyed at a cost and this financially impacts on the healthcare system.

The financial cost associated with the waste medicines themselves is only a small part of a wider problem. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) reports that 30 to 50 percent of medicines prescribed for long-term conditions are not being taken as intended, resulting in a loss of millions of pounds in terms of potential health gain from medicines adherence.² Non-adherence with prescribed medicines results not only in wasted medicines but also in related poor health outcomes for patients.

There are many ways that pharmacy teams can contribute to reducing waste medicines and this guide addresses possible routes and solutions to achieving this as a profession.