

# Q&Amy: Can I donate unused prescription drugs?



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**Q:** I sometimes have leftover unopened medications. I tried to donate them to a clinic, but they can't accept them. Is there somewhere I can donate them?

**Amy in short:** Despite studies showing people often forgo medications because of cost and estimates reporting mind-boggling amounts of prescription drug waste, the opportunities to donate unused medicines are limited and often aren't available to individuals. But there is at least one place that can help.

**A bit more:** A [2012 report](#)

([http://www.commonwealthfund.org/~media/Files/Publications/Fund%20Report/2013/Apr/1681\\_Collins\\_insuring\\_future\\_biennial\\_survey\\_2012\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.commonwealthfund.org/~media/Files/Publications/Fund%20Report/2013/Apr/1681_Collins_insuring_future_biennial_survey_2012_FINAL.pdf)) from the Commonwealth Fund, a foundation active in health care and policy, found that more than a quarter of chronically ill adults taking medicine for their conditions skipped doses or did not fill a prescription because of cost. Among the uninsured, that number rises to 60 percent.

"We have had patients, more because of expensive copays, asking their pharmacist which medication can I get this month and which one can I skip," said Craig Burrige, CEO of the South Carolina Pharmacy Association.

Meanwhile, tons of medications are destroyed each year. [Marketplace radio program reported](#) (<http://www.marketplace.org/topics/health-care/shocking-cost-wasted-prescription-pills>) in December that long-term care facilities alone dispose of as much as \$2 billion a year in unused prescriptions, often when a patient changes medication or dies.

In response to the problem, about 40 states [have established](#) (<http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/state-prescription-drug-return-reuse-and-recycling.aspx>) drug repository or donation programs, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, though not all of them are active or operational. Laws vary, but many limit donors to regulated institutions like long-term care facilities or hospitals and exclude controlled substances from donation.

[Wyoming's](#) ([http://trib.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/medication-donation-program-matches-drugs-with-wyoming-patients/article\\_4e726ede-f4f3-5788-9bd8-aac05779ffc4.html](http://trib.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/medication-donation-program-matches-drugs-with-wyoming-patients/article_4e726ede-f4f3-5788-9bd8-aac05779ffc4.html)) program has saved poor residents more than \$7 million in drug costs. [Iowa's program](#) (<http://www.iowapdc.org/drugdonationrepository.aspx>), believed to be the largest among the states, has distributed more than \$13 million in free medicine and supplies since 2007.

"We have people that have been on the program for heart medication and things that they really need to survive, and if we weren't here, I don't know how they would get their medication," said Barbara Horn, Iowa's drug donation repository manager.

South Carolina does not have such a program, though legislation to establish one has been introduced several times in recent years. The latest, [proposed](#) ([http://www.scstatehouse.gov/sess119\\_2011-2012/bills/3863.htm](http://www.scstatehouse.gov/sess119_2011-2012/bills/3863.htm)) in 2011, was referred to committee and died there.

That legislation, like many enacted in other states, would not have allowed for donation of unused medicines by individuals.

"It is for patient safety. I can understand where that's coming from," said Suzie Foley, executive director of the Greenville Free Medical Clinic. "I can also understand the frustration people feel when they have an extremely expensive medication that it just seems like it's a waste to throw it away. Isn't there some way to get that into the hands of people that need it and can't afford it?"

One possible outlet: Iowa.

Its drug program accepts donations from individuals, including those who don't live there. Medications must be in unopened, tamper-evident packaging (so, not a traditional bottle of pills), must not be expired and must not require refrigeration. Controlled substances are not accepted. A [short form](#) (<http://www.iowapdc.org/CMDocs/ipdc/Individual%20Donation%20Form.pdf>), available on the program's website, must be submitted along with the medicine.

Horn said she receives 10 to 15 out-of-state donations every month.

One California company is [targeting pharmaceutical waste with technology](#) ([http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/20/recycling-unused-medicines-to-save-money-and-lives/?\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/20/recycling-unused-medicines-to-save-money-and-lives/?_r=0)), creating a web-based system for redistributing medications that otherwise would be destroyed.

Sirum (<http://www.sirum.org/>), referred to by co-founder George Wang as the "Match.com for surplus medicine," accepts donations from healthcare facilities and sends them to safety-net clinics. The company website said it has made 1.5 million pills available to 85,000 low-income patients.

A South Carolina Board of Pharmacy policy (<http://www.llr.state.sc.us/pol/pharmacy/PFORMS/BOP%20Policies%20Procedures.pdf>), in place since 2007, allows permitted pharmacies to donate medications to free medical clinics that serve indigent or uninsured patients.

"We are aware that this policy is being utilized; however, we are not aware of the degree of utilization," said Lesia Kudelka, spokeswoman for the state Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation, under which the Board of Pharmacy falls.

Greenville Health System's pharmacy does not donate medications, said Steve Ranck, director of ambulatory pharmacy services. And the Greenville Free Medical Clinic said it does not receive donations from pharmacies. Most of its medications, which are distributed free of charge to uninsured, low-income patients, are donated directly by manufacturers.

If you have unused medications, the annual Project Rx (<http://www.ariverremedy.org/>) drug take-back day will be held Sept. 19 at seven Upstate collection sites (<http://www.ariverremedy.org/2015/07/fall-2015-project-rx/>).

A permanent drug collection box has also been established at the Greenville County Law Enforcement Center on McGee Street, and the Environmental Protection Agency offers recommendations (<http://water.epa.gov/scitech/swguidance/ppcp/upload/ppcpflyer.pdf>) on how to safely dispose of medicines at home.

Got a question? Send it to Q&Amy by emailing me at [aburns@greenvillenews.com](mailto:aburns@greenvillenews.com) or calling 864-298-3822. You can find me on Twitter at [@QandAmyNews](http://www.twitter.com/qandamynews) (<http://www.twitter.com/qandamynews>).