

Spring 2024

# THE ANTIDOTE

News and Notes from the Blue Ridge Poison Center

## Poison Centers Seeing Sharp Rise in Calls About Ozempic® (Semaglutide)

Poison centers across the U.S. are seeing a sharp rise in calls related to *semaglutide*, an injected prescription medication used for the treatment of type 2 diabetes and weight loss. Semaglutide is the active ingredient in brand-name drugs Wegovy®, Ozempic®, and Rybelsus®.



### Background

Semaglutide was approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2017. In 2022, it gained fame as a drug that could aid in weight loss when many celebrities began posting about its success on social media. As a result, demand for the drug skyrocketed and its drugmaker Novo Nordisk could not keep up. The FDA officially listed a drug shortage of semaglutide in 2022. According to law, when there is an official shortage of a prescription medication, compounding pharmacies are allowed to produce and sell off-label versions. The compounded versions have become very popular because they are easier to find and cheaper than the brand name versions.

### Why is this a problem?

- A. The compounded versions of semaglutide are often different. Many contain semaglutide salts. The FDA says the salt forms of the drug have not been tested and are not approved to be safe and effective.
- B. The name-brand drugs are sold in pre-filled syringe pens. Patients dial to the correct dose and click to inject, so it's harder to make mistakes. Compounded versions, however, typically come in multidose glass vials, and patients draw their own doses into syringes. It's easy to get confused and accidentally overdose.

The FDA has received many reports of adverse events after people used compounded versions of the drug. In June 2023, the agency issued a [public warning](#) against use of compounded versions of the medication.

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**What adverse effects are people experiencing?**

The most common adverse effects reported are nausea, vomiting, and stomach pain. Some people have been hospitalized because their symptoms were so severe. (Note that even when the patented Novo Nordisk version is used as directed, people can have these adverse effects, especially when they first start the drugs).

Semaglutide overdose can also result in *hypoglycemia*, a dangerous drop in blood sugar. Symptoms of hypoglycemia include feeling lightheaded or dizzy, feeling jittery, sweating, chills and clamminess, irritability, headache, weakness, and fatigue.

**How to protect yourself**

- Only use semaglutide as directed under the supervision of your healthcare provider.
- Avoid using compounded versions of the drug. Visit this FDA website for help identifying [counterfeit semaglutide](#) products that have been shown to be problematic.

**Where to get help**

If you experience any adverse effects after using semaglutide—or a compounded, off-label version of the drug—stop using it and contact your healthcare provider. You can also call the Blue Ridge Poison Center for guidance. Our experts are available 24 hours a day, every day at 1-800-222-1222. Free and confidential.

**Got Leftover Drugs? Get Rid of Them.**

The Blue Ridge Poison Center is asked this question a lot: How do you get rid of unwanted, expired, or leftover medicine? The answer is not complicated—see the next page for some simple steps. But first, let's talk about why getting rid of leftover medicine is so important.

All of the medicines in your home—including over-the-counter (OTC) products, vitamins, and supplements—are potential poisons when used in the wrong way, by the wrong person, or in the wrong amount. Prescription medications are of particular concern:

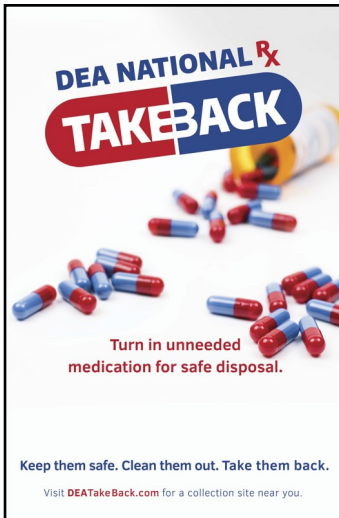
- Some medicines prescribed to adults are so dangerous to small children, *as little as one pill* could result in life-threatening health effects.
- Prescription medicine *could be misused* by someone who thinks it might help them lose weight, relax, have fun, or study more effectively. This could be dangerous.
- It is risky to leave medicine *within reach* of those with mental health problems or who may be at risk for self-harm.

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**POISON TRIVIA**

TRUE or FALSE? Cannabis plants grown and harvested today are more potent (stronger) than cannabis 30 years ago.

Answer on page 4



**Protect others**

Monitor of all the medicines in your home. Would you notice if any pills were missing, or looked different? Store everything out of sight and up high, where kids can't reach. Consider using a locked box or cabinet, particularly if any household members or guests are at risk for medicine misuse or self-harm. Only keep what you need or plan to use. Get rid of any expired, unwanted, or leftover medicine.

**How do you dispose of medicine safely?**

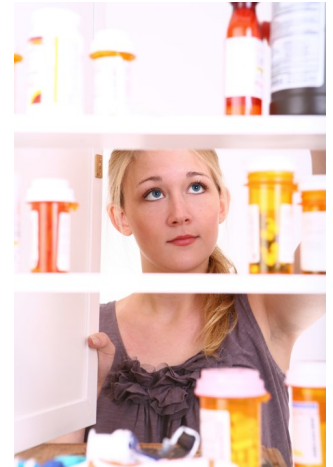
Some organizations and businesses are registered with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) to collect your unused medicines year-round. [Find a site near you](#) or call the DEA Diversion Control Division at 1-800-882-9539.

Twice yearly-- in April and October-- the DEA sponsors a nationwide Medicine Take-Back collection event. Visit [DEAtakeback.com](http://DEAtakeback.com) for more information and to locate a site near you. There are hundreds all across Virginia.

Can't make it to a collection site? The Blue Ridge Poison Center recommends people follow the guidelines of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) who has studied this topic extensively. The FDA advises that nearly all drugs, both over-the-counter and prescription, should be discarded in household trash after following a few safety measures:

**SAFE DRUG DISPOSAL GUIDELINES**


- **Pour** liquid medicine directly into the trash.
- **Mix** pills with something distasteful, such as coffee grounds or kitty litter.
- **Place** into a sealed plastic bag or other container.
- **Toss** the bag or container in your household trash.
- **Scratch** or mark out label information before putting prescription containers into the trash.
- Most empty inhalers can be discarded in the trash, but read the label carefully to be certain.



**What about flushing?**

The FDA recommends flushing certain medicines so that they stay out of the trash. This is reserved for products like narcotics that could cause serious harm even in small doses if swallowed by a child, an animal, or someone intentionally misusing the medicine. Contrary to popular belief, flushed drugs are not the biggest source of medicine residues detected in the public water supply. Instead, the biggest source is urine of people who consumed the medicine. There is currently no evidence of adverse human health effects from drug residues in the environment. **Visit the [FDA website](#) for a list of medicines that should be flushed.**

Poison Trivia answer: TRUE. Cannabis is up to 30 times more potent today than it was decades ago. Higher potency is linked to unwanted side effects including agitation, nausea and vomiting, changes in heart rhythm, and more.




## Coming Soon: National Poisoning Prevention Week

In 1962, President John F. Kennedy proclaimed the third week in March as National Poison Prevention Week (NPPW). NPPW provides a great opportunity to call attention to the problem of poisoning and remind people to:

- Identify potential poison dangers in the home;
- Take action to prevent poisonings;
- Call the toll free Poison Helpline for information and advice: 1-800-222-1222.

This year, **NPPW is March 17-23, 2024**. The Blue Ridge Poison Center will be reaching out to the pharmacies in our service area (there are over 600!) and offering them stickers and refrigerator magnets to insert in every prescription filled during the week.

Last year, pharmacies distributed materials to approximately *125,000 Virginia households* through this program. The stickers and magnets feature the Poison Help toll-free number. Having this number near every phone is crucial so you don't waste valuable time trying to find it in an emergency. The poison center also advocates programming the number into your cell phone. Scan this image to make that easy:



**Scan the code | Save the number | Save a life**

The Blue Ridge Poison Center is affiliated with University of Virginia Health. Other funding sources include the Virginia Department of Health and HRSA. We are accredited by America's Poison Centers. Proudly serving the Commonwealth since 1978. [Join the mailing list](#) to receive this quarterly newsletter, or visit [www.brpc.virginia.edu](http://www.brpc.virginia.edu).

