

Use and disposal of medicines and poisons after a disaster

Fact sheet

In the wake of widespread devastation caused by, for example, cyclones, earthquakes, floods, storms, tornados, fires and epidemics, medicines and poisons may be damaged or unsafe.¹

Identifying affected medicines and poisons

Medicines and poisons may be unsafe as a result of:

- contact with contaminated floodwater;
- exposure to heat or smoke from a fire;
- damage to the packaging or the medicine/poison from an impact, for example part of label missing, illegible label, broken or punctured container, or perforated blister strip;
- exposure to temperatures, light or humidity outside the guidelines on the manufacturer's label, caused by damaged, insufficient or inadequate storage, including when power is temporarily unavailable.



Stack of tablets in foil wrapping

Salvaging medicines and poisons

Persons should avoid any unnecessary, direct contact with damaged or unsafe medicines and poisons. Salvaging of medicines and poisons is not recommended unless you are certain the package, contents and label have not been affected in any way.

Any affected medicines and poisons must be disposed of in the appropriate way.

Disposing of medicines and poisons

Medicines

The Environmental Protection Regulation 2019 (Qld) (**EPR**) classifies medicines and pharmaceutical waste as 'regulated waste'. To prevent environmental contamination, medicines must not be disposed of as general waste. They must not be poured down a sink, flushed down a toilet, or sent to landfill as they persist for a long time in the environment and in water supplies. The EPR requires that all medicine waste must undergo high temperature incineration (as the final step of disposal).

¹ Section 13 of the *Disaster Management Act 2003* (Qld) provides a definition of 'disaster' and section 16 provides examples of 'events'.

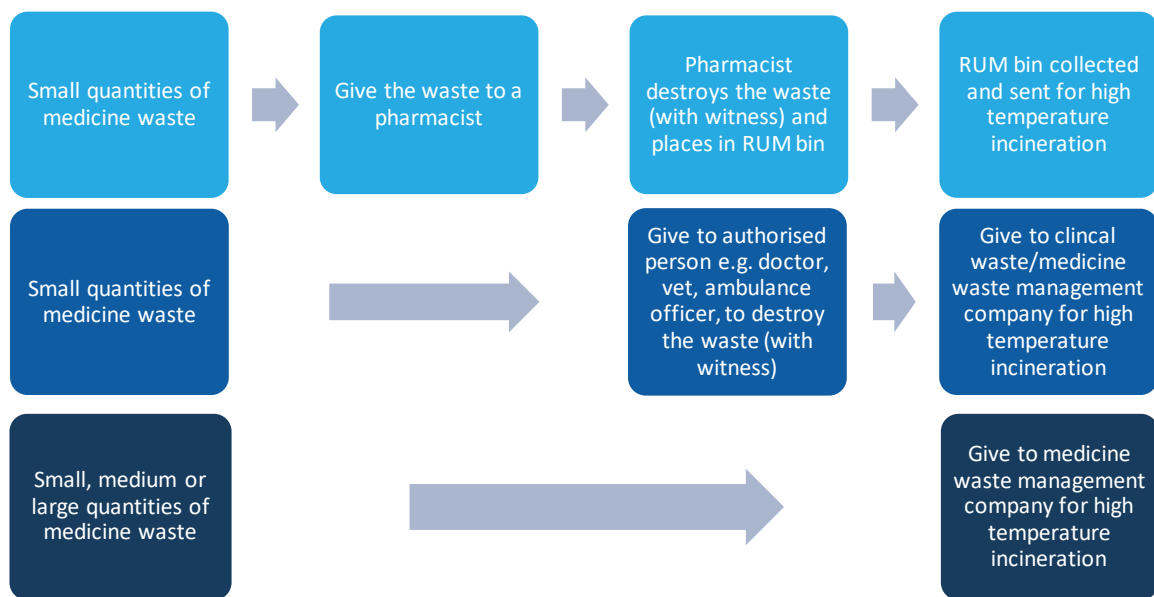
The *Medicines and Poisons Act 2019* (Qld) (**MPA**) contains specific provisions concerning disposal² and destruction of medicines and poisons, including who may destroy certain medicines and records that must be kept.

Under no circumstances may a person *abandon* waste from medicines or poisons.

Members of the public, businesses and organisations with **small quantities of medicine waste** may give the waste to a pharmacist under the Commonwealth funded Return Unwanted Medicines (**RUM**) Project³. Where possible, the pharmacist will destroy and dispose of the waste in a “RUM bin” which is then collected and sent for high temperature incineration. Where this is not possible, the pharmacist must keep the medicine waste secure and arrange for collection by a local waste management company. If the pharmacist is unable to accept the waste, the waste may also be given to a doctor, veterinary surgeon or ambulance officer. Persons unable to find someone suitable to accept the waste should contact the Department of Health on 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84).

Large or commercial quantities, including waste from aged care, hospitals and other health facilities are not appropriate for inclusion in a RUM bin and should be given directly to an authorised medicine waste management company for high temperature incineration.

The diagram below provides some examples of pathways for disposal.



For more information about disposal and destruction of medicine waste and associated processes, please refer to the factsheet below:

www.health.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0022/1113097/fs-disposal-destruction-medicine-waste.pdf

² Under section 28 of the MPA, to *dispose*, of waste from a regulated substance, means to discard, destroy or abandon the waste at a place.

³ Return Unwanted Medicines is a national not-for-profit company funded by the Commonwealth Government through the Department of Health to address the Quality Use of Medicines (QUM) in Australia. The returned medicines are disposed of by high-temperature incineration, which is in accordance with regulatory and EPA requirements (returnmed.com.au/about-us/).

Poisonous substances

Poisonous substances are grouped into schedules under the Poisons Standard according to the degree of control recommended to be exercised over their availability, with progression through these schedules signifying increasingly restrictive regulatory controls.

The Environmental Protection Regulation 2019 (Qld) (EPR) classifies certain poisons as 'regulated waste', which must not be disposed of as general waste. Like medicines they must not be poured down a sink, flushed down a toilet, or sent to landfill.

During a disaster, a poison may be disposed of in one of the following ways:

1. contact your local council to find out if the poison can be disposed of at a landfill or other hazardous waste collection point in your area.
2. contact a licenced regulated waste contractor to collect and dispose of the poisons

Any person who holds an approval for a Regulated Poison⁴ should comply with their approval conditions with regard to the poison's disposal.

Sharps and cytotoxic products

Needles, sharps and liquid cytotoxic products should be placed in designated sharps or waste containers specifically designed for such waste and disposed of via existing commercial disposal arrangements. Health practitioners or businesses unable to comply with this advice should contact Department of Health on 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84).

Further information

- Department of Health (for information on ensuring safe drinking water and food safety in an emergency) <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/disaster>
- Contact your doctor, pharmacist, hospital or health clinic;
- Contact your local council;
- Call 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) at any time;
- Contact 13 QGOV (13 74 68) for your nearest public health unit.

⁴ A Regulated Poison is defined under section 5 of the Medicines and Poisons (Poisons and Prohibited substances) Regulation 2021.