BLAST BELLY FAT!
AMAZING 30-DAY PLAN

SMOKE FIRE MEAT
COOK LIKE A MAN P.148

SAY THIS, LIVE LONGER P.168

CHARM HER PANTS OFF

STRIP AWAY TRAVEL STRESS
TAKE THIS, TOSS THAT

The expiration dates on your OTC meds are there for a reason. But sometimes it pays to bend the rules.

IMAGINE FINDING MONTHS-OLD MILK BURIED IN THE BACK OF YOUR FRIDGE.
If you dare open it, you definitely won’t risk drinking it—the foul smell and floating chunks are big hints that what you’re holding is unfit for cereal. Upchuck averted. But what if we replaced the milk with milk of magnesia?
Hmm. It looks okay.
And it doesn’t smell funny...

Ultimately, you’ll decide whether to use or lose the laxative based on the only clue you have: the expiration date. And that’s fine—assuming you don’t have a coin to flip. The truth is, many OTC meds don’t morph into poisons or placebos one minute—or one year—past their expiration date. Those dates simply signify how long the drugmaker guarantees potency and safety, says David Apgar, Pharm.D, an assistant professor of pharmacy practice and science at the University of Arizona. “If they tested it for three years, that doesn’t mean it won’t last for six. It just hasn’t been proven.”

So how do you know when expiration dates matter? Turn the page for your chuck-it cheat sheet. We’ll show you which numbers to heed, stretch, or ignore.
Sunscreen

NEED IT Rule of thumb: Before you use any expired medication, consider the worst thing that could happen if the drug doesn't work. If it's sunscreen, you could be courting skin cancer. So always discard expired tubes and bottles, says Stephen Hoag, Ph.D., a professor of pharmaceutical sciences at the University of Maryland. In fact, if you allow your sunscreen to bake on the beach with you instead of leaving it indoors or in the shade, consider tossing the bottle before the expiration date. Intense heat can accelerate the breakdown of the active ingredients, potentially leaving you unprotected.

Aspirin

STRETCH IT "It's well documented that aspirin loses potency over time," says Lee Cantrell, Pharm.D., a professor of clinical pharmacy at UC San Francisco. For example, in a recent study published in Jama Internal Medicine, Dr. Cantrell and his colleagues discovered that decades-old aspirin retained only about 1 percent of its original strength. But what about a bottle that's just one year past its expiration date? If you're like this, don't rely on your eyes—your nose knows the answer. "Aspirin breaks down to acetic acid, which smells like vinegar," Dr. Apgar says. "That's not dangerous, but the drug would not be effective."

Benzoyl Peroxide (acne treatment)

IGNORE IT In the fight against acne, benzoyl peroxide has a significant size advantage. "It's a fairly small molecule," says Mikhail Langner, M.D., a dermatology researcher at UC San Francisco. Smaller molecules absorb into your skin easily, and there's a high concentration of benzoyl peroxide in each drop of cream. So losing a few molecules won't seriously alter the zit-zapping action.

Mouthwash

NEED IT Although some mouthwashes contain an antiseptic, they also have a high percentage of water. That means there's a chance of bacterial growth—especially after two years, when the potency of the active ingredient starts to diminish, says Jennifer Jablok, D.D.S., a Manhattan-based dentist. Of course, if you're still working on the same bottle after two years, your love life has probably expired too.

Dextromethorphan (cough suppressant)

NEED IT Cough up the money for a new bottle. In a study from Spain, researchers subjected cough syrup to stability testing and found that dextromethorphan degraded more than the other syrup ingredients did. Plus, as with many liquids, time isn't kind to cough syrup: The alcohol can evaporate or the active ingredient can sink to the bottom, leaving an unequal distribution of what's left, says Dr. Apgar.

Guaiifenesin (expectorant)

STRETCH IT Good news for hackers: Sealed guaiifenesin tablets stay potent for an average of about seven years after their use-by date, reports a study from the FDA. "It's a relatively safe chemical," says Dr. Apgar. However, when guaiifenesin is in liquid form, live by the label. The drug could crystallize at the bottom of the bottle, and "the top two teaspoons of liquid wouldn't have much active ingredient," he warns.

Hydrocortisone Cream

NEED IT That itch is a bitch, and you don't want an infection too. Anywhere you have high moisture content, as with creams, you have a greater opportunity for bacteria to grow," says Kelly Reynolds, Ph.D., a professor of public health at the University of Arizona. And when you touch the tube's tip, you contaminate the cream. "Eventually the preservatives wear off, so bacteria can proliferate," she says.

Ibuprofen

STRETCH IT Sometimes. "We found that some brands could last for years past the expiration," says Wendy Cory, Ph.D., an assistant professor of analytical chemistry at the College of Charleston. But read the rest of the label: If polyethylene glycol, polyborate 80, or povidone are listed as ingredients, buy a new bottle. These chemicals speed ibuprofen's breakdown, Cory's study shows.

STASH YOUR DRUGS HERE

You won't get the most out of your meds if you expose them to heat, humidity, or light—all three make drugs degrade faster. That means the bathroom, kitchen, and car are off-limits. You might assume that the cool, dark refrigerator is ideal. Wrong. It's too humid, says David Apgar, Pharm.D., an assistant professor at the University of Arizona. The exceptions: eye drops and products specifically labeled for refrigeration. The best place for your other meds? The bedroom, away from windows and lamps.
Health / Take This, Toss That

**Toothpaste**

Maybe you ran out of your regular toothpaste and now find yourself staring at a long-forgotten tube that’s been lurking in the back of your medicine cabinet since 2009. Let it stay forgotten. “After two years, fluoride can lose its strength, so it won’t bind as well to your teeth,” says Dr. Jablok. “The toothpaste won’t be dangerous to use, but you’ll miss out on protection against cavities or plaque.” What’s more, she says, the mint flavoring may start to disintegrate, leaving you with less-than-fresh breath.

**Acetaminophen**

Expiration decade would be more like it. In a study by Dr. Cantrell, unopened acetaminophen that was 28 to 40 years out of date still retained 99.7 percent of the original dosage, though an opened bottle won’t be as handy. Also, Dr. Cantrell warns that his study tested potency and not efficacy or safety. So if that ancient Tylenol tablet doesn’t seem to be working, don’t pop another, because you have no idea how much of the drug remains (and how large a dose you’re taking). Just buy a new bottle.

**Terbinafine**

(athlete’s-foot cream)

That dusty tube of antifungal cream won’t transform into something funky. It breaks down into harmless substances, says Dr. Langner. “That means it’s okay to use—you just may not be getting the full efficacy.” Give your cream a quick once-over before you go slathering it between your toes: “Do you notice some difference in texture—is it thinner? Has it developed an acidic odor? Is it hard?” says Dr. Langner. If the answer to any of these questions is yes, spring for a new tube. You’ll do your feet (and the other guys in the locker room) a big favor.

**Salicylic Acid**

(wart remover)

Even after the expiration date has faded from the box, these products may still be able to erase warts. “I have acids that have been sitting in my lab for years. The pH doesn’t change;” says Dr. Langner. “If the pH is still what it was when you purchased the drug, it will still be effective.” Plus, with acids, “there is less possibility of degradation upon exposure to the elements, like light, water, and heat,” he adds. The best test? Give the stuff a try. “You can use your body’s response as a gauge for whether or not the product is working,” says Dr. Langner.

**Loratadine**

(antihistamine)

This, the key ingredient in the allergy med Claritin, can probably survive just about anything you throw at it. In a study from India, scientists subjected loratadine tablets to rigorous stress tests—in one experiment, the pills were in 158°F heat for six hours, and in another, they were exposed to direct sunlight for 24 hours. In both cases, more than 99 percent of the active ingredient survived. That’s nothing to sneeze at. “If I suspect it would be okay after expiration,” says Hoag. And as it breaks down, Dr. Appar adds, “It’s not going to turn into a dangerous chemical.”

**Eye Drops**

Drop expired drops in the trash; otherwise you’re putting your eyes at risk. “These products can become contaminated with bacteria—if, for example, you touch the dropper to your eye,” says Dr. Appar. “If they’re kept at room temperature, the bacteria can grow quickly.” (That’s why you should store your drops in the fridge. Germs can’t proliferate as fast in cool conditions.) And always toss clear drops that have turned cloudy—even if the expiration date is far off. Muckiness signals contamination.

**Naproxen**

The active ingredient in Aleve soldiers on, according to a joint study from the Department of Defense and FDA. The scientists discovered that naproxen retains its pain-killing potency for an average of 52 months after the expiration date. Keep in mind, however, that the tablets tested were still sealed in their original packaging, so an opened bottle probably won’t last quite as long. And if you notice that your pills have changed color or started to crumble, just discard them, says Coty.

**Isopropyl Alcohol**

Don’t be afraid to hit the bottle after the date. “Isopropyl alcohol is a very simple chemical,” says Hoag. “There’s just not much that could happen to it.” And even though it’s liquid—a drug form that typically favors bacterial growth—as much as 99 percent of that liquid is alcohol, a chemical known for its antimicrobial activity. “The higher the alcohol concentration, the more likely it is to remain stable for a long time,” Dr. Appar says. As long as the liquid is clear and not cloudy, you’re in the clear to use it.