

RGH Pharmacy E-Bulletin

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A joint initiative of the Patient Services Section and the Drug and Therapeutics Information Service of the Pharmacy Department, Repatriation General Hospital, Daw Park, South Australia. The RGH Pharmacy E-Bulletin is distributed in electronic format on a weekly basis, and aims to present concise, factual information on issues of current interest in therapeutics, drug safety and cost-effective use of medications.

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Safe use of fentanyl patches

Fentanyl patches are used for pain relief for those patients unable to use oral medication due to unacceptable adverse effects, or for better control of pain. Recently NSW Health issued a safety notice highlighting possible adverse events resulting from use of the patches. The warning included reports from overseas describing deaths and serious side effects associated with fentanyl patches. The reports included:

- Death of an elderly patient following application of a heat pack over the patch to relieve pain at the site, causing increased fentanyl absorption and the suspected application of a second patch without removing the first;
- Death of a child who applied one of his mother's patches to his body;
- Children escaping near-misses following self-application of a patch.

A recent incident involving a heat pack placed over a patch in a NSW hospital was picked up by a pharmacist who counselled the patient on use of patches, and prevented an adverse event.

Fentanyl patches contain the drug in an adhesive reservoir covered by film that releases the medication over 72 hours, at an average rate of fentanyl delivery per hour that is determined by the specific product involved. The release of fentanyl is effectively controlled by the skin stratum, and variations in skin temperature may affect the delivery rate of fentanyl due to changes in skin permeability. For example, fever may result in a more rapid delivery rate.

The Product Information (PI) for Durogesic[®] patches and the Consumer medicine information (CMI) contain several warnings. The warnings include effect of fever or external heat source while using a fentanyl patch, and the possible increase in the amount of fentanyl absorbed by the patient.

Other warnings include safe disposal of removed patches by sticking the adhesive together and wrapping the patches before disposal. This is to help prevent misuse, but will also make the patch less accessible to small children and animals. The patches still contain a significant amount of medication after 72 hours of application.

The safety notice also recommends that health care professionals prescribe, dispense and administer in accordance with the Product Information. Patients and caregivers should be provided with a copy of the CMI and counselled about the potential for an increased effect from fentanyl patches if they take certain other medications or alcohol, or if there is an increase in body temperature or heat.

Inform patients and care givers of the signs of fentanyl overdose, and reinforce that that immediate medical attention must be sought. Fentanyl held in the skin after removal of a patch has a mean half life ranging from 22 - 25 hours. Therefore the patient who experiences serious adverse events should be monitored for up to 24 hours.

Safe storage of patches and appropriate disposal methods of unused or unneeded patches should also be highlighted.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION – CONTACT THE PHARMACY DEPARTMENT ON 82751763 or email: chris.alderman@rgh.sa.gov.au
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