

Medicines Matters

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A reminder on the safe use of fentanyl patches

Following the death of a 56-year-old lady in Derbyshire, a [Prevention of Future Deaths Report](#) has been published. The lady was found deceased at home with two fentanyl patches applied to her body, rather than the single patch prescribed. The report highlighted some factors that may have contributed to a fentanyl overdose.

The report identified the following potential contributing factors:

- Missed opportunities by both GP practice and hospital pain clinic for review of the fentanyl therapy.
- Postmortem examination also identified codeine in her system.

Important advice to give to patients/caregivers:

- Fentanyl patches contain a strong opioid analgesic. Patients and/or carers should follow dosage instructions carefully and only change patches as directed on the dispensing label - every 3 days (72 hours).
- **Always remove the old patch before applying a new patch.**
- Avoid exposing patches to direct heat sources such as heating pads, electric blankets, hot-water bottles, saunas, prolonged hot baths, tanning lamps or prolonged sun exposure, as this can increase fentanyl absorption and the risk of overdose.
- Patients should seek medical advice if they develop a fever or raised body temperature whilst using fentanyl patches.
- If breathing becomes slow, shallow, weak or difficult, remove the patch and seek urgent medical attention/help.
- Used patches should be folded in half with the adhesive sides stuck together before disposal. Discard safely by placing the folded patch back into the original pouch and place the pouch in the bin with your household rubbish. Accidental exposure to both used and unused patches can be fatal, particularly in children.
- Patches must not be cut. Avoid touching the adhesive side of the patch when applying or removing patches.
- Wash hands thoroughly after patch application and removal.
- Patients should be directed to the local [Fentanyl Patch Guide for Adult Patients](#) for further information.

Important advice for healthcare professionals:

- Fully inform patients and caregivers about the directions for safe use, storage and disposal of fentanyl patches (see above).
- Ensure patients and caregivers are aware of the signs and symptoms of fentanyl overdose i.e. trouble breathing or shallow breathing; tiredness; extreme sleepiness or sedation; inability to think, walk, or talk normally; and feeling faint, dizzy, or confused. Patients and caregivers should be advised to seek medical attention immediately if overdose is suspected.
- Ensure **regular** medication reviews. [The Faculty of Pain Medicine](#) recommends 6 monthly reviews.
- The Lancashire and South Cumbria ICB [High dose morphine in chronic non-cancer pain position statement](#) advises that the MAXIMUM morphine equivalent dose prescribed in primary care should not exceed 50mg per day.

For prescribing purposes, clinicians in primary care should therefore not exceed fentanyl 12 micrograms / hr for any new patients.

Fentanyl patch strength (micrograms/hr)	Approximate oral morphine equivalent (mg/day)	Above/Below local recommended maximum for NEW patients
12	30	Below
25	60	Above
50	120	Above
75	180	Above
100	240	Above

For further detailed information regarding serious and fatal overdose of fentanyl patches and fatal opioid toxicity from accidental exposure to fentanyl, see the following MHRA Drug Safety Updates:

- [Serious and fatal overdose of fentanyl patches](#)
- [Transdermal fentanyl patches: life-threatening and fatal opioid toxicity from accidental exposure, particularly in children.](#)