

WA MEDICATION SAFETY GROUP ALERT

Analgesic skin patches

Until now fentanyl patches have only been available on the PBS for chronic severe cancer pain. However, from August 2006 the listing was expanded to include chronic non-cancer pain¹. Therefore this is an appropriate time for WA Medication Safety Group (WAMSG) to draw your attention to an FDA Advisory² issued following reports of deaths and serious side effects in patients using fentanyl patches. The information below has been adapted from an alert from the SAFER Medicines Group of NSW TAG³.

Fentanyl skin patches are very strong narcotic (opioid) painkillers that may cause death from overdose. The fentanyl skin patch should always be prescribed at the lowest dose needed for pain relief.

Fentanyl skin patches should not be used to treat short-term pain, pain that is not constant, or for pain after an operation. Fentanyl skin patches should only be used by patients who are already taking another narcotic painkiller (ie patients who are opioid tolerant), and who have chronic pain that is not well controlled with shorter-acting painkillers.

Patients who are using the fentanyl skin patch and their caregivers should be told about the safe use of the patch and should be directed to follow these instructions exactly. These directions are also provided in writing in the Consumer Medicines Information (CMI) leaflet.

Patients who are using the fentanyl skin patch and their caregivers should be told about safe methods of storage and disposal of used, unneeded or defective fentanyl skin patches. Fentanyl skin patches should be stored in a safe place and kept out of the reach of children. The CMI recommends storage in a locked cupboard at least one-and-a-half metres above the ground. Dispose of used, unneeded or defective fentanyl skin patches by folding the sticky side of the patch together until it sticks to itself. The CMI recommends wrapping the folded patch and disposing it carefully in the garbage. The designated garbage should be stored out of the reach of children.

Health care professionals who prescribe the fentanyl skin patch and patients who use the fentanyl skin patch and their caregivers should be aware of the signs of fentanyl overdose. Signs of fentanyl overdose include trouble breathing or shallow breathing; tiredness, extreme sleepiness or sedation; inability to think, talk or walk normally; and feeling faint, dizzy or confused. If these signs occur, patients or their caregivers should get medical attention straight away.

Patients using fentanyl skin patches may have a sudden and possibly dangerous rise in their body level of fentanyl or have a stronger effect from fentanyl if they:

- use other medicines that affect brain function or, medicines that affect how fentanyl is broken down in the body;
- drink alcohol;
- have an increase in body temperature or are exposed to heat.

These factors are described further in the Product Information.

¹PBS listing: <http://www.npsradar.org.au/site.php?page=1&content=/npsradar/content/fentanyl.html>

² FDA Public Health Advisory "Safety Warnings Regarding Use of Fentanyl Transdermal (Skin) Patches" (www.fda.gov/cder/drug/advisory/fentanyl.htm)

³ NSW TAG SAFER Medicines Group Alert

<http://www.ciap.health.nsw.gov.au/nswtag/publications/otherdocs/Fentanylalert0706.pdf>