Reducing the harm caused by misplaced nasogastric feeding tubes in adults, children and infants

This Alert updates and strengthens Patient Safety Alert 05 (Reducing the harm caused by misplaced nasogastric feeding tubes) and is based on national learning since then. It does not replace Reducing the harm caused by misplaced naso and orogastric feeding tubes in babies under the care of neonatal units, issued in August 2005.

Patient Safety Alert 05 provided guidance for the NHS on checking and confirming that a nasogastric tube had been inserted into the right place, i.e. the stomach.

This followed reports to the NPSA’s National Reporting and Learning System (NRLS) of patient death as a result of feeding into the lung through misplaced nasogastric tubes.

Since the completion date for that Alert’s actions (1 September 2005), the NRLS has received reports of a further 21 deaths and 79 cases of harm due to feeding into the lungs through misplaced nasogastric tubes. The main causal factor leading to harm was misinterpretation of x-rays. This was found in 45 incidents, 12 of which resulted in the death of the patient. The focus for this new Alert therefore supports safe x-ray interpretation.

Other causes of harm related to failure to follow the guidance in Patient Safety Alert 05 including: feeding despite obtaining aspirate between pH6 and pH8 (seven incidents including two deaths), instilling water down the tube before obtaining aspirate (two incidents), no checking of tube placement by any method (nine incidents including one death). A repeated finding in local investigations was that no written record was made of pH obtained or of x-ray interpretation before feeding commenced1-2,3.

This Alert does not change the advice given in Patient Safety Alert 05 that pH testing remains the first line test, and x-ray checking remains the second line test.

For the purpose of this Alert the definition of ‘to feed’ and ‘feeding’ includes the introduction of any feed, liquid or medication through the nasogastric tube.

This Alert must be read in conjunction with the Supporting Information, available at www.nrls.npsa.nhs.uk/alerts

Healthcare professionals should ensure that:

a. Before a decision is made to insert a nasogastric tube, an assessment is undertaken to identify if nasogastric feeding is appropriate for the patient, and the rationale for any decisions is recorded in the patient's medical notes.

b. Placement is delayed if there is not sufficient experienced support available to accurately confirm nasogastric tube placement (e.g. at night), unless clinically urgent, and that the rationale for any decisions made is recorded in the patient's medical notes.

c. Nasogastric tubes used for the purpose of feeding are radio-opaque throughout their length and have externally visible length markings.

d. pH indicator paper is CE marked and intended by the manufacturer to test human gastric aspirate.

e. Nasogastric tubes are not flushed, nor any liquid/feed introduced through the tube following initial placement, until the tube tip is confirmed, by pH testing or x-ray, to be in the stomach.

f. pH testing is used as the first line test method, with pH between 1 and 5.5 as the safe range, and that each test and test result is documented on a chart kept at the patient's bedside.

g. X-ray is used only as a second line test when no aspirate could be obtained or pH indicator paper has failed to confirm the position of the nasogastric tube and that:

i) X-ray request forms clearly state that the purpose of the x-ray is to establish the position of the nasogastric tube for the purpose of feeding.

ii) The radiographer takes responsibility to ensure that the nasogastric tube can be clearly seen on the x-ray to be used to confirm tube position.

iii) Documentation of the tube placement checking process includes confirmation that any x-ray viewed was the most current x-ray for the correct patient, how placement was interpreted, and clear instructions as to required actions. Any tubes identified to be in the lung are removed immediately, whether in the x-ray department or clinical area.

h. Any individual involved with nasogastric tube position checks has been assessed as competent through theoretical and practical learning.

i. ‘Whoosh’ tests, acid/alkaline tests using litmus paper, or interpretation of the appearance of aspirate are never used to confirm nasogastric tube position as they are not reliable.

j. A full multidisciplinary supported risk assessment is made and documented before a patient with a nasogastric tube is discharged from acute care to the community.

Further information
For further information visit www.nrls.npsa.nhs.uk/alerts
Patient Safety Alert

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Nasogastric tubes: x-ray interpretation aid

a. Is nasogastric tube feeding the right decision for this patient?
b. Is this the right time to place the nasogastric tube and is the appropriate equipment available?
c. Is there sufficient knowledge/expertise available at this time to test for safe placement of the nasogastric tube?

To confirm gastric position of the nasogastric tube, ask:

- Does the tube path follow the oesophagus/avoid the contours of the bronchi?
- Does the tube clearly bisect the carina or the bronchi?
- Does it cross the diaphragm in the midline?
- Is the tip clearly visible below the left hemi-diaphragm?

Proceed to feed only if all criteria are met. If in any doubt repeat x-ray or call for senior help.

Below are two examples where the nasogastric tube has been incorrectly identified as being in the stomach:

Radiograph 1 shows the tip of the nasogastric tube above the diaphragm and on the right-hand side of the thorax. The presence of ECG leads make interpretation of the radiograph more difficult.

Radiograph 2 shows the tip of the nasogastric tube apparently below the left hemidiaphragm but the tube clearly follows the contours of the left bronchus. In fact, the tube is positioned in the left lower lobe of the lung.

X-rays must always be interpreted by someone assessed as competent to do so, and the decision to feed a patient must be documented in the patient’s medical notes, dated, timed and signed by that person.