

Patient briefing

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Alert

28 March 2007

UNDERSTANDING NPSA ADVICE

The National Patient Safety Agency (NPSA) helps healthcare organisations to provide safer healthcare for everyone. This information is about the advice the NPSA has given healthcare organisations on making sure oral liquid medicines are administered safely.

Promoting safer measurement and administration of oral liquid medicines

Liquid medicines and feeds are often given to babies, young children and adults who are unable to swallow solids. They may be given by mouth or via a feeding line which has been passed into the stomach via the patient's nose.

The National Patient Safety Agency (NPSA) is aware of patients with a feeding line and an intravenous line being harmed; oral medicines or feeds have accidentally been administered into the blood because the two lines were mixed up.

One of the reasons for these incidents occurring involves the use of intravenous syringes to measure and administer oral liquid medicines. Once medicines of this type are drawn up in an intravenous syringe they can be connected to intravenous catheters and administration sets and given in error. Some feeding tubes have access ports for medicine administration that require the use of intravenous syringes.

The NPSA has issued advice to healthcare organisations on action that can reduce the chances of this kind of mistake happening again. The NPSA recommends these organisations only use oral and enteral syringes to measure and administer oral liquid medicines. It is also recommended that within 12 months healthcare organisations should only purchase enteral feeding tubes with connector ports for oral and enteral syringes.

How this advice will affect you

Currently, when patients are unable to take medicines from a spoon or are prescribed liquid medicines that cannot be easily measured using a spoon, the pharmacist provides an 'oral' syringe for measuring the dose and giving the medicines. This is the case for patients in hospital and at home. This arrangement will continue.

Where patients receive liquid medicines or feeds via a feeding line, the shape of the port on the feeding line and the types of syringes that fit those ports will change. Syringes used to give medicines intravenously will no longer be able to connect to a feeding line.

Manufacturers who make the feeding lines are planning to incorporate these changes into their devices by 31 March 2008. Until this date, NHS trusts may use existing devices and will carefully manage the risks when intravenous syringes are used to administer medicines via feeding lines.

If you use a feeding line, such as a gastrostomy or jejunostomy tube, the appearance of the connectors and ports may change in the near future. The syringes you use to connect to these ports will change accordingly. Your hospital or community dietician, district nurse or pharmacist will be able to advise you in more detail about how this change will affect you.

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About the NPSA

The NPSA promotes safer healthcare by collecting and analysing information about patient safety from staff and patients, and through working with healthcare organisations to promote an open and fair culture.

If you would like more information about the NPSA's work, visit our website at:

www.npsa.nhs.uk