

Briefing document for patient queries

On the 2 September 2008 the National Patient Safety Agency (NPSA) issued its alert on hand hygiene: Clean Care is Safer Care. The alert provides advice to healthcare staff on when they should use alcohol handrub and when they should use soap and water, as well as advising on the best location for alcohol handrub dispensers to minimise the risks of using it.

The role of the NPSA is to improve the safety of patients being treated in the NHS. Therefore the alert emphasises the importance of hand hygiene at the point of care (i.e. use of hand hygiene within the immediate vicinity of the patient whether in hospital, in an ambulance, in a care home, in a community environment or any other healthcare setting including homecare) as there is evidence to support that improving hand hygiene at this point will reduce healthcare associated infection (HCAI).

Hospital visitors, patients and the public may be concerned that the NPSA recommends hand hygiene only at the point of care and not at ward entrances, corridors, entrances to buildings, lifts or any other sites. The NPSA suggests that if the NHS wishes to place handrub dispensers at sites other than the point of care, it is a local discretionary decision.

The key points from the alert are:

1. The role of hand hygiene by healthcare staff in preventing and controlling infection
2. The point of care as the crucial moment for hand hygiene
3. The appropriate placement of hand hygiene products
4. Which hand hygiene products to use and when
5. The current recognised standard for hand hygiene products
6. Management of risks including ingestion, fire and skin irritation

Definition of point of care

The point of care refers to the patient's immediate environment (zone) in which healthcare staff-to-patient contact or treatment is taking place. In the hospital environment it is usually at the patient's bed, but in other contexts it could be in a treatment room, cot, chair, ambulance or a patient's home for example.

A copy of the Alert and materials to support implementation is available from www.npsa.nhs.uk

The following questions and answers should help respond to the most common patient queries.

Q. Will using the alcohol handrub reduce my risk of getting an infection?

A. One of the main ways in which infection is spread in healthcare is on the hands of healthcare staff. Therefore, the most effective way of reducing healthcare associated infection is by improving the hand hygiene of healthcare staff.

Alcohol handrub may be provided for patients and the public to use, for example at the hospital or ward entrance, but there is no evidence to support this reducing the risk of infection. Promoting its use by patients and the public can raise awareness of hand hygiene generally and some trusts have chosen to do this.

Q. What if I am helping to care for my friend/relative? Do I need to use the alcohol handrub then?

A. If you are helping to nurse your friend/relative you should be cleaning your hands before and after touching them. Using the alcohol handrub provided at the point of care (for example, attached to the bed, locker or wall) is the quickest and most effective way to do this. However, should your hands become visibly soiled, have direct contact with body fluids, there is an outbreak of Norovirus, *Clostridium difficile* or other diarrhoeal illness, or your friend/relative is vomiting and/or has diarrhoea then you should always clean your hands with soap and water. Please ask the nursing staff to show you how and where you can clean your hands.

Q. What about visitors bringing in germs from the outside?

A. There is no evidence to suggest that visitors play a role in transmission of healthcare associated infections – therefore there is no clinical reason for patients and visitors to be asked to use alcohol handrub unless they are helping to provide care to a patient. However, best practice suggests that visitors and members of the public should clean their hands with soap and water when they come into a hospital or other healthcare setting where patients are receiving care to remove any dirt from their hands.

Q. Has the Alert been issued in response to people drinking the alcohol handrub?

A. No. Hand hygiene improvement needs to focus on healthcare staffs' use at the point of care as evidence shows us that this is the time and place where there is the highest likelihood of transmission of infection. By focusing on the point of care, it will also help manage some of the risks associated with the use of alcohol handrub, such as ingestion (eating or drinking), fire, skin irritation and splashing in eyes.

Q. Does this mean alcohol handrub will be removed from hospital and ward entrances?

A. This is a decision for trusts to make locally. The NPSA is advising that it is most beneficial to patient safety to place alcohol handrub dispensers at the point of care. Placement at other sites is at the discretion of local trusts and should be based on an assessment of risk, cross infection and risk of unintended use.

Q. How do I know if healthcare staff are using handrub at the point of care?

A. You should see the healthcare worker using the handrub at the point of care. If you don't then it's OK to ask.