

What patients and families should know about fentanyl patches

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In September 2007, media reported that the Ontario Chief Coroner had launched an investigation into the accidental deaths of three patients resulting from overdoses of a pain medication that was administered as a stick-on patch. The medication was fentanyl also known as fentanyl patch or transdermal fentanyl, or by the names 'Duragesic®', 'Ratio-fentanyl®', 'Ran-fentanyl®'. The Institute for Safe Medication Practices Canada (ISMP Canada) published a safety bulletin in 2006 which highlighted two cases of adolescent deaths associated with the use of the fentanyl patch. The bulletin was based on an advisory from Health Canada and on an overview of the voluntary reports ISMP Canada had received on fentanyl.

Fentanyl is a very potent narcotic drug. Fentanyl, when used in the patch form, provides continuous delivery of medication through the skin and into the bloodstream to control pain around-the-clock.

According to the Duragesic® product monograph this medication is intended to be used in adult patients who:

1. are experiencing persistent, CHRONIC, moderate to severe pain;
2. need continuous (round-the-clock) pain medication for an extended period of time;
3. are already receiving narcotics with a total dose equivalent to at least 60 mg morphine per day orally; and
4. whose pain cannot be managed by other means, such as other short-acting narcotics taken orally.

Fentanyl patches should not be used for patients who do not meet these criteria or if there is

any concern that the patch may not be administered properly or if the patient cannot be monitored for possible side effects.

There are several things that patients (and their families) can do to help ensure safe use of fentanyl patches. These include the following:

- Provide complete information regarding your medication use as well as your medical history, including allergies, to your doctor and other health-care professionals. It is helpful to write this information down and update it when changes occur, as well as bringing your medications with you whenever you receive care.

Why? This information will help to accurately determine if the fentanyl patch is the right treatment for you and what the best dose would be.

- If you are prescribed fentanyl, be sure you understand the reason it has been prescribed, what the dose is and how often you should change the patches. Be sure to ask what you can expect, and if any changes need to be made for other medications you have been taking.

Why? When you know what the treatment plan is, you are better able to be an active partner in safe medication use.

- Know how to apply the fentanyl patch correctly. Fentanyl patches are usually changed every 3 days. It is important to develop a reliable reminder system to help you remember when to change the patch. And, before applying the new patch, the old patch must be removed.

Why? It is very important that you receive the dose that was ordered for you. Used patches still contain a substantial amount of medication. You will receive more medication than was ordered for you if an old patch remains on after a new one is applied.

This can lead to serious side effects from an overdose. ISMP Canada has received reports of harm caused by old patches not being removed.

- Do NOT cut the patch or use a damaged patch.

Why? The patch has a special layer that releases the drug at a certain dose. If this layer is cut or damaged, you could receive a larger amount of fentanyl than prescribed and this could lead to serious side effects from an overdose of medication.

- Ensure the patches are stored safely and disposed of properly.

Why? Fentanyl is a very potent narcotic. Even after you have finished using a patch, there is enough medication left in the patch to seriously harm someone else. Remember, children are fascinated with stickers and bandages. Make sure all patches, even used ones, are kept out of reach of children.

- Avoid using a heat source directly on the skin area where you apply the patch. This

includes heating pads, electric blankets, hot tubs, saunas, heated water beds, etc...

Why? The amount of fentanyl released by the patch is affected by the skin's temperature. With added heat, excessive amounts of fentanyl could be released through the skin and lead to an overdose.

- Know what side effects to watch for especially those that may indicate you may be getting too much fentanyl. These symptoms can include: shallow or slowed breathing that may cause shortness of breath, extreme sleepiness, inability to think, talk or walk normally, and feeling faint, dizzy or confused. It is important to seek medical attention immediately if these occur.

Why? If an overdose is recognized early, it can be treated.

- If you are experiencing symptoms of overdose, it may not be enough to just remove the patch. Seek medical attention immediately.

Why? The fentanyl from the patch is absorbed by your

skin. The medication then sits under your skin for many hours before it is absorbed into your blood. Even when the patch is removed there can be medication under your skin that will continue to be absorbed. Your symptoms may worsen.

- Be informed about fentanyl. Ask questions. If you don't understand, or something does not seem right, speak up. Speak up again until your question is answered.

Why? Having knowledge about fentanyl will help you to use your medication correctly. It will also help to prevent mishaps from occurring and will help to catch problems early if they do occur.

ISMP Canada's bulletin can be accessed at: <http://www.ismp-canada.org/download/ISMPCSB2006-05Fentanyl.pdf>.

Detailed information about fentanyl (Duragesic(r)) is available at: http://www.janssen-ortho.com/JOI/pdf_files/Duragesic_E.pdf.

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