

Fentanyl/Duragesic® Patches

A number of coroners' reports have recently been reviewed by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia, the College of Pharmacists of British Columbia and the Registered Nurses Association of British Columbia. The cause of death in each case was overdose due to fentanyl. The deceased had used fentanyl patches that had been prescribed for someone else.

A used fentanyl patch may contain enough residual drug to cause harm. Studies have found that after three days of continuous use, fentanyl patches may still contain 30% to 50% or more of the labelled amount of fentanyl. Therefore, the appropriate disposal of used and unused patches is important in both health care facilities and in the community.

Health care facilities should have policies in place for the proper disposal of fentanyl patches. Policies should instruct the nurse to remove the patch from the patient and fold the patch in half so the adhesive backing is folded together and adheres to itself. The patch should then be disposed of in a sharps container. Gloves should be worn when handling the patch. This process should be undertaken by a nurse and witnessed by another nurse. This disposal should be documented on the patient's MAR and initialled by both the nurse and witness.

Patients in the community who have leftover unused, used or expired fentanyl patches should be encouraged to place them in a tamperproof, childproof container and return them to a community pharmacy for appropriate disposal or to use the manufacturer's recommendations for disposal.

The manufacturer's product monograph recommends flushing used and unused patches down the toilet. Given concerns about the environmental impact of drugs in the water supply other disposal methods should be considered when possible. This is not a suitable alternative in locations with septic fields or septic tanks.

The product monograph advises that the gel from the drug reservoir must not accidentally touch the skin and if it does the skin should be flushed with water only. Soap, alcohol and other solvents should not be used to remove the gel from the skin because they may increase the drug's ability to penetrate the skin.

Pharmacy managers must ensure that returned or expired fentanyl patches are made unusable or inaccessible until they can be appropriately destroyed. Pharmacists must educate patients and care givers about the safe administration, removal and disposal of fentanyl patches.