

Skin Ointments and Other Skin Products Containing Paraffin (Emollients)

Patients treated with skin ointments and other skin products containing paraffin (emollients) must be made aware of the potential fire risks associated with these products.

Patients who smoke or use a naked flame may cause clothing, bedding or bandages to catch fire. The risk also applies if the patient is near to others who are smoking or using a naked flame.

The risk is increased when these products are applied to large areas of the body and when clothing, bedding or bandages become soaked with these skin products [1].

Regardless of strength of paraffin-containing products, all patients and carers must be informed of the fire risk with any paraffin-containing skin product.

Best Practice

- Health care staff have a duty to inform patients of the fire risks associated with skin products that contain paraffin.
- Patients must be given information in both verbal and written form on the potential fire risks of smoking, using a naked flame or being near to those who are smoking or using a naked flame when prescribed, dispensed or administered these products for the first time. A record of the information provided should be kept and should be communicated on regular occasions with the patient ensuring that the information has been understood [1].
- Patients and their families and staff looking after patients must be advised to regularly change bedding that has been in contact with paraffin-containing skin products, preferably on a daily basis. Paraffin soaks into fabrics and can become a fire hazard. Chairs can also become soiled by paraffin [1]. London Fire Brigade says on the BBC Health website that “even regular washing of night clothes and bed linen might not eliminate the danger, unless it is washed at a high temperature, as paraffin is invisible and can accumulate over time.” [2]
- Smoking status of the patient should be recognised prior to prescribing a paraffin-containing skin product. Patients who do smoke must be appropriately advised and provided with ongoing support to stop smoking [1].
- Patients who are known to health care staff as smokers or those that require large quantities of skin products containing paraffin (100g or more) should be considered for a water-based product (e.g. cream or lotion) rather than a paraffin-containing one to reduce the fire risk [3].
- Patients should be encouraged to share the information given to them with their relatives [1].
- In hospitals or care homes, ensure that fire safety information is appropriately displayed, in particular where patients are treated with paraffin-containing skin products [1].

- If a patient goes against the advice given by the healthcare staff and decides to go off the ward/out of the care home to smoke – they should be advised to wear thick outer clothing that has not been in contact with paraffin-containing products [1].
- Relatives should be informed if a patient does not comply with safety advice whilst they are treated with the paraffin-containing skin product [1].

Further Resources

Drug Safety Update: Paraffin-based skin emollients on dressings or clothing: fire risk (includes information on where to report incidents)

<https://www.gov.uk/drug-safety-update/paraffin-based-skin-emollients-on-dressings-or-clothing-fire-risk>

National Patient Safety Agency (now NHS Improvement)

<http://www.nrls.npsa.nhs.uk/resources/?entryid45=59876>

Patient safety video

<http://www.nrls.npsa.nhs.uk/patient-safety-videos/paraffin-based-skin-products/>

West Sussex Coroner's Report: lower strength paraffin-based products

<https://www.judiciary.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Hills-2015-0317.pdf>

Risk assessment provided by London Fire Brigade

<http://www.london-fire.gov.uk/Fire-risk-in-care-homes.asp>

BBC Health

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-39308748>

References

1. MHRA. Drug Safety Update: Paraffin-based skin emollients on dressings or clothing: fire risk. Accessed from <https://www.gov.uk/drug-safety-update/paraffin-based-skin-emollients-on-dressings-or-clothing-fire-risk> on 24.3.17
2. BBC News Health. Skin creams containing paraffin linked to fire deaths. 19.3.2017. Accessed from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-39308748> on 24.3.17
3. East Lancashire Health Economy Medicines Management Board. Advice accessed from <http://www.elmmb.nhs.uk/elmmb-formulary/joint-medicines-formulary/13/13-2/> on 24.3.17

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