

Fentanyl and buprenorphine skin patches: How to use and dispose of them safely

Key messages

- Fentanyl and buprenorphine skin (“transdermal”) patches are used to relieve severe, long-lasting, pain. They must be used according to the instructions. Always **read the leaflet** that came with the patch, so you know about safe use and possible side effects.
- A patch may cause **serious harm** if it accidentally touches or sticks to somebody else’s skin or if a child puts it in their mouth
- It is very important to:
 - **Follow the instructions for use** – Read the instructions closely every time you use a patch (see instructions on the patch, on the box, and in the leaflet that accompanies your medicine). Never divide or cut the patch. Wash hands after application
 - **Ensure the patch is stuck on securely** – Choose the application site carefully and make sure that the patch is stuck, especially around the edges, by pressing it for 30 seconds
 - **Avoid heating patches** – Make sure the patch doesn’t heat up (for example, with a hot-water bottle or a long hot bath); heat can cause a dangerous amount of medicine to come out of the patch
 - **Remove and fold old patches** – Always remove and dispose of old patches before adding a new one. Fold the patch in half as soon as it is removed so that the sticky side sticks firmly to itself and put it back in the original sachet
 - **Dispose of safely** – Keep patches out of sight and out of reach of children. Dispose of used patches in a household waste bin. If you have any safety concerns about this please discuss with your pharmacist.
 - **Return unused waste patches to a pharmacy for disposal**
 - **Check twice a day** that your patch is still in place
- If a patch transfers to another person, remove it and get medical help immediately (dial 999 and ask for an ambulance)
- If a patch is **swallowed**, get **medical help immediately** (dial 999 and ask for an ambulance)

What are fentanyl and buprenorphine skin patches and what do they do?

Fentanyl and buprenorphine skin (transdermal) patches contain a strong opioid painkiller, either fentanyl or buprenorphine depending on which patch you have. Patches are prescribed to help to relieve severe, long-lasting pain.

Why is this important information for you and your family?

A few people every year are harmed through accidental exposure to patches not meant for them (for example, when another person's patch accidentally sticks to their skin or is swallowed).

In some cases, the patches had become detached in bed and stuck to someone sleeping next to them. In others, children have retrieved the patches from the bin and swallowed them, causing a fatal overdose. Used (old) patches still contain active medicine and can cause these effects too.

Signs of fentanyl or buprenorphine poisoning or overdose

In the most serious cases, accidental transfer of patches can result in a dangerous overdose. Signs of an overdose are:

- Shallow breathing
- Drowsiness
- Extreme sedation.

If you are using a fentanyl or buprenorphine patch and your breathing becomes shallow and weak, **take the patch off and seek medical help immediately** by dialing 999.

What to do if you experience a side effect or reaction

Fentanyl or buprenorphine overdose or accidental exposure requires urgent medical attention. Talk to your doctor, pharmacist, or healthcare professional if you have any concerns about your medicines or suspect you have had a side effect or an adverse reaction to a medicine.

Based on MHRA leaflet Fentanyl skin patches: How to use and dispose of them safely (October 2018)

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5bbdfd58ed915d732b992548/Fent-patient-sheet-FINAL.pdf>

With amendments by Barnsley Specialist Palliative Care Team, December 2018 and updated June 2021