

Choosing medicines for patients unable to take solid oral dosage forms

Selecting suitable formulations for adult patients with swallowing difficulties or feeding tubes.

A stepwise approach is suggested:

STEP 1

Use a licensed medicine in a suitable formulation.

For example:

- Licensed liquid preparation
- Soluble tablets
- Powders or granules for suspension

In order to use a licensed medicine, consider switching to a different agent in the same class, or to a different route of administration.

For example, consider:

- Fluoxetine liquid (licensed preparation) as an alternative to sertraline tablets.
- Aspirin dispersible tablets instead of clopidogrel tablets.
- HRT patches instead of tablets.

Consider the patient's method of feeding:

Patients on liquid feeds may take oral liquid medicines, dispersible tablets or solid preparations dispersed in water prior to administration. For patients on thickened fluids, liquid medicines can be mixed with a suitable feed thickener. Consider speaking to speech and language therapy for advice.

Patients on soft-food diets may be able to swallow crushed tablets or the contents of capsules given with food.

Patients with enteral feeding tubes may have oral medicines given by this route.

Why licensed status matters

To be granted a licence a medicine must meet quality standards and be shown to be safe and effective. Licensed medicines usually come with a patient information leaflet and are considered the safest choice.

Special-order medicines are unlicensed and are not required to meet the same standards as licensed medicines. Prescribers take greater responsibility when using them.

In most cases a licensed preparation will be available that meets the patient's needs.

Cost

Special-order medicines are often considerably more expensive than licensed medicines. They may have short shelf-lives compared with licensed alternatives and may need fridge storage.

For example, bendroflumethiazide liquid is significantly more expensive than tablets:

- 28 doses of 2.5mg tablets costs £0.66.
- 28 doses of 2.5mg/5ml oral suspension costs £37.19.

NB: Bendroflumethiazide tablets can be dispersed in water for administration orally

STEP 2

Use a licensed medicine in an unlicensed manner, for example by crushing / dispersing tablets in water or by opening capsules.

For example:

- Folic acid tablets can be crushed and mixed with water.
- Bendroflumethiazide tablets can be dispersed in water.

The above examples are suitable for administration orally or via a feeding tube. Not all medicines are suitable for administration in this way and it is important to **check beforehand** (see over).

Prescribers take responsibility for the unlicensed use of medicines used in this way. Authorisation should be confirmed in writing by including the relevant information in the prescription details. The prescriber should contact the patient's community pharmacy (if known) to ensure the pharmacist is aware that a licensed product is being used off license. Consider switching to a different agent or route of administration in order to use a licensed product.

Is it needed?

If the patient is taking medicines that aren't needed or aren't working, stop or change them.

Care staff can only give licensed medicines in an unlicensed way on the instruction of a prescriber. Care staff should document this in the patient's care plan. Practical directions are overleaf.

STEP 3

In the few situations where there is no licensed option, consider using a 'special'.

Special-order ('special') liquid medicines are unlicensed and expensive. They should only be used if there is no licensed medicine that meets the patient's needs. The on-going need for a special should be reviewed. Practice level prescribing data on 'specials' is available from the Medicines Management Team.

Licensed medicines should be used where possible.
Special-order medicines are unlicensed and expensive and should only be used if there is no licensed alternative.

Practical directions

ALWAYS check beforehand if a tablet is suitable for dispersing / crushing, or a capsule suitable for opening.

Crushing / dispersing tablets

Many immediate-release tablets can be dispersed in water without crushing; some medicines need crushing first. Some tablets (e.g. modified release, enteric coated etc) are not suitable for crushing.

For medicines that are suitable for crushing, crush using a pestle and mortar, a tablet crusher or between two metal spoons.

Only crush medicines one tablet at a time; do not crush all the patient's medicines together. Crushing or dispersal should only be performed immediately before administration.

Opening capsules

Some hard gelatin capsules can be opened and their contents mixed with water or administered with food. Some capsules are too small to manipulate. Capsules should only be opened immediately before administration.

Giving medicines in soft food

Some capsule contents or crushed tablets can be given with cold soft food (e.g. teaspoon of yoghurt /jam). Use a small amount of food to ensure the full dose is taken.

Crushed tablets or capsule contents may taste very bitter to patients taking them orally. Mask the taste by giving with strong flavours such as blackcurrant.

Medicines should only be administered in food with the patient's knowledge and consent. Hiding medication in food is considered 'covert administration' and is only allowed in certain circumstances, when a medical practitioner states that an individual lacks 'capacity to consent to treatment' and the medicine is essential to their health and well being. The patient's needs must be carefully assessed and there should be open discussion and agreements within the multidisciplinary team and the person's relatives or advocate. Appropriate documentation must be in place. Care homes must have a clear policy on the covert administration of medicines.

Administering medicines via feeding tubes

Feeding tubes should be flushed with water before and after each medicine is administered. If a liquid medicine is thick or syrupy, dilution may be required. Some patients are fluid restricted; this needs to be taken into account.

When administering crushed tablets or opened capsules via a feeding tube, add the powder to 15-30ml water and mix well. Draw into a 50ml oral syringe and administer. If you have used a mortar or tablet crusher, rinse this with water and administer the rinsings also.

Suggested protocol for administering medicines via feeding tubes:

1. Stop the feed (leaving a feeding break if necessary).
2. Flush the tube with 30ml water.
3. Prepare the first medicine for administration and administer down the tube.
4. Flush with 10ml water.
5. Repeat stages 3 and 4 with subsequent medicines.
6. Flush with 30ml water.
7. Re-start the feeding (leaving a feeding break if necessary).

Care staff may only administer medicines in an unlicensed manner on the instruction of the prescriber. Care staff should document this in the patient's care plan together with advice received from a pharmacist.

Where can I get advice?

For advice on choosing appropriate dosage forms or to check if tablets or capsules can be dispersed, crushed or opened, contact the SYICB Barnsley Medicines Management Team or UKMi Medicines Information Centre.

- **SYICB Barnsley Medicines Management Team 01226 433798**
- **Barnsley Hospital NHS Foundation Trust Medicines Information 01226 432857**
- **Trent Medicines Information Centre 0116 2586491 Email medicines.info@uhl-tr.nhs.uk**

Additional Information

BNF for children indicates for some medicines whether tablets can be crushed, or capsules opened <https://bnfc.nice.org.uk/>

Care Quality Commission. Covert administration guidance <https://www.cqc.org.uk/guidance-providers/adult-social-care/covert-administration-medicines>

[Barnsley possible alternatives to unlicensed specials guidance](#)

[Barnsley prescribing thickeners for adults guidance](#)

[Barnsley covert administration of medication for patients in care homes guidance](#)

References also listed at the bottom of the page

Only prescribe special-order medicines if there is no suitable licensed medicine available that meets the patient's needs.

It may be appropriate to use a licensed medicine in an unlicensed way.

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References:

- SPS Choosing formulations of medicines for adults with swallowing difficulties. Available at: <https://www.sps.nhs.uk/articles/choosing-formulations-of-medicines-for-adults-with-swallowing-difficulties/>.
- SPS Preparing medicines for administration to adults with swallowing difficulties. Available at: <https://www.sps.nhs.uk/articles/preparing-medicines-for-administration-to-adults-with-swallowing-difficulties/#:~:text=What%20are%20the%20considerations%20when%20crushing%20tablets%20or%20opening%20capsules%20in%20a%20care%20home%20setting>
- White R and Bradnam V. Handbook of drug administration via enteral feeding tubes. London: RPS Publishing; 2007.
- Smyth J. The NEWT Guidelines for administration of medication to patients with enteral feeding tubes or swallowing difficulties. Available at: <https://www.newtguidelines.com/> (subscription required)