

FENTANYL PATCHES – ANY BETTER THAN MORPHINE?

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM? Fentanyl is a strong opioid similar to morphine. Patches containing fentanyl cost more than oral morphine. In the last year (up to Sept 2021) Barnsley spent around £253,000 on fentanyl patches. If half of this had been prescribed as morphine slow release (e.g. Zomorph®), approx. £60,000 would have been saved.

MAJOR CONSIDERATIONS

- Patches containing fentanyl (e.g. Fencino® and Matrifen®) are appropriate for use in patients with stable pain who are intolerant of morphine or have renal failure.
- Patches are not suitable for titrating the dose upwards in acute or unstable pain due to the delay in achieving higher blood levels: it may take up to 36-48 hours after a dose change for blood levels to reach a new stable level.
- After removal of a patch, a reservoir of active drug may remain in the skin and continue to be absorbed for as long as 22 hours (average 17). This can cause difficulties in switching to alternative analgesics.
- Increased absorption from patches may occur with raised temperatures such as occur in pyrexia or during a hot bath. Fatalities have occurred as a result.¹
- Prescribers may be unaware of the large amounts of opioid these patches can deliver.
- A number of problems with the use of opioid patches have been raised locally. There have been a number of incidents where patients have forgotten to remove one patch before applying the next one increasing the risk of adverse events.
- Local prescribing guidelines advise the use of oral morphine as first line choice strong opioid. See Guidance on the use of strong opioids in Barnsley at:

<https://best.barnsleyccg.nhs.uk/clinical-support/medicines/prescribing-guidelines/Opioid%20Comparison.pdf>

*contraindicated in patients who are allergic to peanuts or soya

Approximate dose equivalents of oral morphine and fentanyl patches

NB These doses are a guide only. They are taken from the Barnsley Palliative Care Formulary.² This data should not be used to switch treatments.

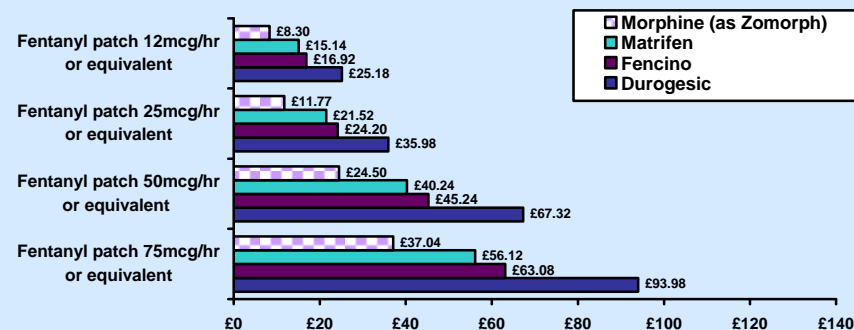
60-90mg morphine in 24 hours	Fentanyl 25 micrograms/hr
135-180 mg morphine in 24 hours	Fentanyl 50 micrograms/hr
225-315mg morphine in 24 hours	Fentanyl 75micrograms/hr

Sources vary in the ratio of potency of these two drugs

- References:** 1. MHRA UK: Drug Safety Update Dec 2014. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/drug-safety-update/serious-and-fatal-overdose-of-fentanyl-patches>
2. Barnsley Palliative Care Formulary 2020-2023. Available at: <http://barnsleybest.nhs.sitekit.net/clinical-support/medicines/prescribing-guidelines/Palliative%20Care%20Formulary.pdf?UNLID=7321004362022412141354>

WHAT ARE THE COSTS?* (30 days, MIMS Sept 2022)

(* Zomorph costs calculated as the nearest twice daily dose available to the upper dose limit equivalent of oral morphine)



Comparison of cost of fentanyl patches at each dose with approximate equivalent dose of Zomorph®. **Note that Durogesic® is much more expensive than Fencino® and Matrifen®.** NB Patients should be monitored closely if any changes in dose or formulation are made.

KEY MESSAGES

- Fentanyl patches are a relatively potent formulation of opioid that are unsuitable in acute or unstable pain due to the need for slow titration of doses.
- Absorption from patches may change. Adverse events (some fatal) have occurred where the patches have been subjected to external heat.
- Adverse events such as respiratory depression are a risk, particularly in those with pre-existing respiratory disease or who are opioid-naïve. The MHRA advice is not to use these unless other opioids have previously been tolerated.
- There are significant cost differences between the different brands of fentanyl patches. Where a prescription is written generically the charge will be for the Durogesic® brand. Matrifen® and Fencino® are cost effective brands – prescribe by brand name.