

Swallowing difficulties or feeding tubes (adults). Refer patients with new swallowing difficulties to speech and language therapy for assessment.

A stepped approach is suggested:

STEP 1

Use a licensed medicine in a suitable formulation

For example:

- **Licensed liquid** preparation
- **Soluble** or **oro-dispersible** tablets
- **Powders** or **granules for suspension**

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

For example, consider:

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

Consider the patient's method of feeding:

Patients on **liquid feeds** may take oral liquid medicines, soluble and dispersible tablets or solid preparations dispersed in water. For patients on thickened fluids, sometimes in practice, it may be necessary to use thickening agents for liquid medicines.

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.

STEP 2

Consider using a licensed medicine in an unlicensed manner e.g. dispersing tablets in water or opening capsules. Check with medicines information beforehand.

Manipulating a licensed medicine for administration orally or via a feeding tube:

- **tablets can be dispersed in water** e.g. **bendroflumethiazide, bisoprolol, amlodipine.**
- **sometimes capsules can be opened or tablets crushed and they can be added to water or food** e.g. **ramipril:** contents placed directly into the mouth, onto bread, in water or apple juice / apple sauce; **zonisamide:** open capsule, add powdered contents to water or apple juice, apple sauce, or chocolate pudding; **quetiapine:** crush and add to water or to soft food (e.g. yoghurt).

Note: not all medicines are suitable for administration in this way.

Is it needed?

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

Care staff should only give licensed medicines in an unlicensed way if there is a written direction in the patient's care plan.

Practical directions are overleaf.

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

Cost Effectiveness

Special-order medicines ('specials') are often considerably more expensive than licensed medicines.

Specials should only be prescribed if no licensed medicine meets the patient's needs.

Liquid 'specials' may have short shelf-lives compared to licensed alternatives and may need fridge storage. To reduce waste, consider dose volume and bottle size and **only prescribe enough medicine to last until the expiry.**

STEP 3

Consider unlicensed options: imported medicine licensed in a different country (not UK) or a 'special' or extemporaneous liquid medicine

'Specials' from NHS manufacturing units (see BNF Special-order manufacturers) should be more competitively priced than non-NHS manufacturers. Medicines information can advise on NHS 'specials' availability.

Licensed medicines should be used where possible. Special-order medicines are unlicensed and can be expensive and should only be prescribed if necessary. See over for where to get advice.

Practical directions

Always check beforehand with a pharmacist if a tablet is suitable for dispersing or crushing, or if a capsule is suitable for opening for administration.

• Crushing or dispersing tablets

Many immediate-release tablets can be dispersed in water without crushing; some medicines need to be crushed first. Some tablets e.g. modified-release are not suitable for crushing.

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

Only crush medicines one at a time; do not crush all the patient's medicines together. Crushing or dispersing 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 liquids or soft food

Some capsule contents or crushed tablets can be given with a small amount of cold liquid (water or fruit juice or cordial) or cool soft food such as a teaspoon of yoghurt or jam. Use a small amount of food to ensure the full dose is taken; if taken with a meal, add medicine to the first mouthful of food.

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 medicines in food is considered 'covert administration' and is only condoned in certain circumstances. Refer to local policy.

• Giving 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 and that 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. Some medicines can also be dispersed in water. 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 give it.
4. Flush with 10ml water.
5. Repeat stages 3 and 4 with subsequent medicines.
6. Flush with at least 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.

A written direction to crush or disperse tablets or to open capsules should be documented in the patient's care plan.

Where can NI health professionals get advice?

For advice on choosing an appropriate dosage form or manipulating a medicine contact your local community pharmacist and/or **your local NI HSC medicines information (MI) centre** or local HSCB office. Contact details;

Belfast Regional MI: 028 9504 0558

or e-mail non urgent enquiries to: medicineinfo@belfasttrust.hscni.net for **Belfast Trust and regional community/primary care.**

Other NI Trusts:

South Eastern MI: 028 9056 1445

Southern MI: 028 3861 2709

Northern MI: 028 9442 4278

Western MI: 028 7161 1462

Regional Pharmacy and HSC Medicines Management Team

Belfast Office: 028 9536 3926

South Eastern Office: 028 9147 5133

Southern Office: 028 9536 2009

Northern Office: 028 9536 2835

Western Office: 028 9536 1008

For full guidance see 'specials' section in <http://niformulary.hscni.net>

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.

References:

UKMi. Medicines Q&A 294.3. What are the therapeutic options for patients unable to take solid oral dosage forms? July 2013. Available online via www.sps.nhs.uk.

White R and Bradnam V. Handbook of drug administration via enteral feeding tubes. Pharmaceutical Press. Available via www.medicinescomplete.nhs.uk (subscription required).

Smyth J. The NEWT Guidelines for administration of medication to patients with enteral feeding tubes or swallowing difficulties. Available at www.newtguidelines.com (subscription required).

Adapted from the UKMi North West document. UKMi. Medicines Q&A 294.3.

Date prepared: November 2015 Date Reviewed: January 2018 March 2018