

MEDICATION SAFETY ALERT

February 2017

Gabapentin/pregabalin: risk of death when taken with other CNS-depressant drugs

Professionals prescribing pregabalin and gabapentin should be aware not only of the potential benefits of these drugs to patients, but also that the drugs can lead to dependence and may be misused or diverted.

An incident involving the death of a patient has highlighted the need for greater awareness of the risks of using gabapentin or pregabalin alongside other drugs that depress the central nervous system.

Learning Points

- Gabapentin and pregabalin can be used for the treatment of epilepsy and neuropathic pain. Pregabalin is also licensed for the treatment of generalised anxiety disorder.
- Gabapentin and pregabalin are associated with significant euphoric effects, which can result in misuse and dependence.
- Gabapentin and pregabalin are also known to cause depression of the central nervous system (CNS). This can lead to drowsiness, sedation, respiratory depression, and in extreme cases, death.
- The adverse CNS effects of gabapentin and pregabalin are additive when used with other centrally acting drugs, including;
 - Opioids (for example, morphine, oxycodone, methadone and heroin)
 - Alcohol
 - Antidepressants
 - Anti-emetics
 - Anti-epileptics
 - Antihistamines - these are often purchased over the counter (OTCs) and patients should therefore be encouraged to seek advice from their Pharmacist before purchasing.
 - Antipsychotics
 - Anxiolytics & hypnotics
 - Barbiturates
 - Skeletal muscle relaxants

Actions

It is advised that all staff involved in the care of patients with a history of substance misuse, and staff who prescribe, supply or administer pregabalin or gabapentin should complete the following actions;

- Read; [Public Health England/NHS England joint guidance statement about the misuse of gabapentin and pregabalin](#)
- Inform the patients who use gabapentin or pregabalin about the risk of dependence, and about the risk of adverse effects if the medication is taken with other CNS-depressant drugs.
- Carefully weigh the risks against the benefits when using gabapentin or pregabalin in any patient with a history of drug misuse or dependence.

Ratified by The Joint Prescribing Committee February 2017

Reference: Public Health England & NHS England (Dec 2014); *Advice for prescribers on the risk of the misuse of pregabalin and gabapentin*. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pregabalin-and-gabapentin-advice-for-prescribers-on-the-risk-of-misuse>

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