

Expiry dates of medication within community care settings

Waste can be caused by:

- inefficient prescribing or re-ordering systems
- inappropriate prescribing
- poor compliance (not taking the medication as prescribed by the GP)

In the past, care home providers and health professional may have adopted a number of system approaches to managing medicines that may in themselves create waste. For example, care home staff returning tubs of topical preparations back to the supplying pharmacy every month and ordering new ones. The NICE guidance on Managing medicines in care homes, March 2014, concluded that provided the medicine is still currently prescribed, is within its expiry date, and the manufacturer's literature does not specify a short shelf-life when the product is opened, there is no requirement for the medicine to be disposed of early and it should be carried forward to the next 28-day supply cycle.

Community pharmacists can contact the GP practice to ensure the medicine is still current or, with appropriate permission, check the patient's summary care record. This enables the pharmacist to keep the medicine on the MAR chart (as 'none supplied this month') to support the care home and care agencies with administration. There should be no need to order medication simply to make sure it appears on the MAR chart.

General points:

- Make sure communication between GP and pharmacy are clear.
- Use customers 'own drugs' before ordering new supplies whenever a customer is accepted into a care setting.
- Request 'prn' (when required) medication to be supplied in original packs rather than in a monitored dosage system (e.g. blister pack).
- When required medicines dispensed in original containers can be carried forward monthly and used up to the manufacturer's expiry date.
- If medicines are missing or medicines are on prescriptions that are not required for this month's cycle, raise with the GP surgery.
- Every pharmaceutical product has an expiry date that is stated on the packaging. The use of the product past its expiry date may result in a lower active ingredient or changes to the product that may cause patient discomfort or a safety hazard due to microbial contamination or toxic degradation of products.
- Record the opening date of liquids, eye drops, creams and ointments on the dispensed product.
- Where employees are uncertain of the shelf-life of a particular medicine once opened, they should check the information supplied with the medicine or contact a pharmacist for advice.
- Over time, labels may fade or peel and essential information may be lost. In such cases advice should be sought from the supplying pharmacy and the product replaced if necessary.

Infection control best practice advice for the use of external preparations such as creams and ointments in all care homes includes the requirement that:

- All creams should be used for a named resident only
- Gloves must be worn when applying creams and ointments
- Expiry dates should be checked at each use
- Creams in pots should be discarded if they appear to be contaminated, or if you have any other concerns about their appearance, or if the lid has been left off for any indeterminate period.

Formulation	Recommended expiry date
Tablets and capsules in original packs	Manufacturer's expiry date
Tablets and capsules packed in MDS	As stated by pharmacy label
Tablets and capsules – loose put in bottle by pharmacy	6 months from dispensing date or manufacturer's recommendation when shorter. Pharmacy to highlight any shorted dated stock.
External liquids (e.g. Lotions, shampoos & bath oils)	6 months from date of opening or manufacturer's recommendation where shorter
Internal liquids in original container (e.g. syrups, elixirs & linctus)	6 months from date of opening or manufacturer's recommendation where shorter
Creams and ointments in tubes or a pump dispenser	6 months from date of opening or manufacturer's recommendation where shorter.
Creams and ointments (pots/ jars)	3 months from date of opening or manufacturer's recommendation where shorter
Suppositories/ pessaries/ rectal tubes / patches	Manufacturer's expiry date
Ear / nose drops and sprays	Discard 3 months after opening unless manufacturer advises otherwise
Eye drops/ eye ointments	1 month after opening or manufacturer's recommendation where longer (e.g. Hylo-Fresh® eye drops = 6 months and VitA-POS® eye ointment = 6 months)
Inhalers	Manufacturer's expiry date
Injections (except insulin)	Manufacturer's expiry date
Insulin	Insulin should be stored in the fridge and can be kept unopened until the expiry date. Once opened it can be stored outside of the fridge for up to 28 days.
Nutritional supplements and thickeners	1 month from date of opening or manufacturer's recommendation where shorter

If you don't receive a patient information leaflet (PIL) or there is any uncertainty about the expiry date of a product, you should contact the supplying pharmacy for advice. A copy of the PIL should be kept with the client's records.

References:

1. Managing medicines in care homes: Social care guideline [SC1] Published date, March 2014 <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/sc1>
2. Mid Essex CCG. Guidance on the Expiry Dates and Storage of Medicines in Care Homes (With or without nursing) August 2019.