

Good Practice Guidance for Care Homes:

Expiry dates for medication

Introduction

After its expiry date, a medicine may no longer be considered safe and / or effective. This is caused either by the breakdown of the active drug or an ingredient in it, or by risk of contamination. It is a legal requirement for the expiry date to be printed on the original container and is determined by the manufacturer. Please note not all medicines deteriorate at the same rate.

Medicines may expire due to:

- Not checking physical quantity of medication in the care home prior to ordering
- Stockpiling
- Receiving excessive quantities
- Poor stock rotation and not checking the expiry dates
- Disruption or lack of synchronisation of prescribing or re-ordering procedures

Please note, it is good practice that any medicines received from the community pharmacy that have been decanted from bulk containers should have a batch number and expiry date on them.

Key points for storage guidelines

- Keep all medication in the original container
- Keep medicines in their original outer packaging
- All medicines should be stored in a cool (below 25°C) dry place unless stated otherwise by the manufacturer, e.g. if refrigeration is required (between 2°C and 8°C)
- “Store in the fridge” might mean store in the fridge until opened and in use for some medications, e.g. insulin is stored in the fridge but once in use it can be stored at room temperature (expiry date then 28 days or the manufacturer’s expiry date if sooner).
- The expiry date of products can change once opened e.g. eye drops, ear drops, creams
- Always record the date opened and the calculated expiry on the medicine package/label
- Medication should be for that named person only; ‘sharing’ of medicines including creams and ointments is not allowed
- If the dispensing label become illegible e.g. on creams, contact the community pharmacist for advice

Possible consequences of using expired stock

- The medication becomes “unlicensed” as this becomes outside the “Product Licence” of the medication
- The active medication could become chemically unstable
- The effectiveness of the medication may change
- The break down products of the medication may be harmful to the patient
- Increased risk of contamination

Any product whose appearance suggests it may be unfit for use should be discarded, irrespective of expiry date. If in doubt, contact your community pharmacy for advice.

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Expiry dates


The manufacturer's expiry on a container is the unopened expiry date. Usually solid dose formulations have a longer expiry date than liquid preparations. After opening, the expiry date may be dramatically shortened. This should be highlighted on the medicine label or container or in the resident's medicines profile. Certain external factors can also affect expiry e.g. contact with water, temperature, air or light.

Depending on the product, the expiry date may be set as a fixed time e.g. after manufacture, after dispensing or even after opening of the manufacturer's original container. Below is a table defining what the expiry dates mean:

Wording on packaging	Definition
Best before January 2021	Expires 31/12/2020
Use before end January 2021	Expires 31/01/2021
Use by January 2021	Expires 31/12/2020
Discard after January 2021	Expires 31/01/2021
Expires January 2021	Expires 31/01/2021
Use within one month of opening	Self-explanatory (ideally every 28 days)
Discard 7 days after opening	Self-explanatory

Expiry after opening

Some oral preparations have a shorter 'shelf life' once the container has been opened. This should be highlighted on the medicine label or container. Your community pharmacy may be able to supply you with 'date opened' labels.

Some products now show an expiry symbol e.g. . However, in the care home setting where storage conditions may be variable and numerous care staff are involved in administration, it is recommended that the suggested expiry dates in this guidance are followed.

Multi-Compartment Compliance Aids (MCCAs)

The appropriate use of Multi-Compartment Compliance Aids (MCCA) - formerly known as 'MDS' or 'blister packs/trays' should only be provided to support a person's independence in self-management of their medicines. It is recommended that medicines dispensed in a MCCA pack are discarded after 8 weeks if they have not been used. Not all medicines are suitable for MCCA packs.

'When required' (PRN) medicines:

NICE Guideline SC1 Managing medicines in care homes states:

- Registered nurses and social care practitioners working in care homes should ensure that PRN medicines are kept in their original packaging
- PRN medicines can be carried forward each month following the expiry date guidance
- Record on the 'carried forward' section of the MAR chart to complete the audit trail
- Stock should be rotated to ensure that the oldest medicines are used first
- Must NOT be returned and re-ordered each month but 'carried over' to the next month

Suggested Expiry of Products from Date of Opening

Due the lack of available robust evidence and information on expiry date information for some medicines, these suggested expiry guidelines are based on general consensus and subject to correct storage of medicines at temperatures recommended by manufacturers.

If there is, no information on shortened expiry date once opened from the manufacturer, and then refer to the table below as a *suggested expiry* from date of opening.

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Formulation type	Recommended Expiry
Tablets and capsules – in original boxes (blister/foil packed) e.g. prn medicines	Manufacturer's expiry date. Do not mix batches. Only order when necessary.
Tablets and capsules – loose i.e. put into a bottle by the pharmacy	6 months from the dispensing date or manufacturer's expiry date if provided by the community pharmacy
Oral liquids (in original manufacturer's packaging or amber bottles)	6 months from date of opening or manufacturer's recommendation where shorter – mark date of opening on container. Antibiotic liquids have a shorter expiry date once reconstituted. Check with community pharmacist if unsure.
External liquids (e.g. shampoos, scrubs)	6 months from date of opening or manufacturer's recommendation where shorter – mark date of opening on container.
Creams/Ointments in tubes	3 months from date of opening or manufacturer's recommendations if shorter. For unopened tubes follow the manufacturer's expiry date
Creams/Ointments in pots, tubs or jars.	1 month from date of opening or expiry date provided by pharmacy. For unopened tubs follow the manufacturer's expiry date
Creams/Ointments in pump dispensers	6 months from date of opening or manufacturer's recommendations if shorter. For unopened pump dispensers follow the manufacturer's expiry date
Sterile Eye/Ear/Nose drops/Ointments	28 days from date of opening. Some drops may need to be stored in the fridge.
SIP feeds	Unopened, follow manufacturer's expiry date. Once opened, follow manufacturer's guidance.
Inhalers/Sprays	Manufacturer's expiry date or refer to dose counter if available
Insulin	Unopened: manufacturer's expiry date when stored in a fridge at temperature between 2°C and 8°C. Once opened: 28 days for insulin vials and pens unless otherwise stated. (When in use do not need to be stored in the fridge; can be stored below 25°C).
Injections (excluding insulin)	Follow manufacturer's recommendation or expiry date.
Tablets and capsules packed into Multi-Compartment Compliance Aid (MCCA) or Monitored Dosing System (MDS)	8 weeks from date of dispensing

The following list is of some medications with specific recommendations around expiry from the manufacturer which need to be highlighted.

Medication	Shelf life once opened
Oramorph® 10mg/5ml Liquid	3 months
Risperdal® 1mg/ml Liquid	3 months
Levetiracetam 100 mg/ml oral solution	4 months
Citalopram 40mg/ml Oral Drops, solution	16 weeks
Folic acid Colonis 1mg/ml oral solution Folic Acid 2.5mg/5ml Oral Solution	3 months (Stored in fridge)
Memantine Hydrochloride 10mg/ml Oral Solution Ebixa® 5 mg/pump actuation oral solution (memantine)	3 months
Donepezil Hydrochloride 1mg/1ml Oral Solution	2 months
Madopar® dispersible tablets/capsules (Levodopa/Benserazide Hydrochloride)	2 weeks if packed down and dispensed into a secondary container.

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Top Tips for managing medication stock

Before you order prescriptions

- Check the physical stock levels of medication for each resident.
- Report excess quantities refused by residents or which you feel may no longer be needed or inappropriate - ask the GP or care home pharmacist to review.

Ordering medication

- Authorised staff to be responsible for ordering with named deputy.
- Check quantities of medication ordered are appropriate for requirement to avoid excess medicines expiring
- Do not forget to check medication not routinely stored in the medicines trolley e.g. PRNs and topical preparations and medications kept by the resident if they self-medicate.
- Request PRNs and medications with a “variable dose” in original packs.

Receiving medication from pharmacy

- Check if there are any specific expiry date instructions.
- Check the medication is still within its expiry date.
- Note and act on any specific storage instruction e.g. store in the fridge.

Storing medication

- Rotate stock so the earliest expiry is at the front to be used first.
- Check expiry dates of all medication every month when the monthly ordering is done.
- Medication should remain in the container in which it was dispensed – batches must not be mixed.

Administering medication

- Check the expiry date of each medication before administering.
- Record the date opened and the calculated expiry on the medicine package/label as per manufacturer guidance e.g. creams. Some packaging does not allow for the pharmacy label to be placed on the product e.g. eye drops. In these instances, the outer packaging will have to be marked with the date of opening. The medication must remain in the outer packaging throughout duration of the treatment.
- Highlight any short expiry date(s) as a reminder to all staff.
- Any product whose appearance suggests it may be unfit for use should be discarded – irrespective of expiry date. If in doubt contact the community pharmacy for advice.

References

- NICE Managing medicines in care homes, Social care guideline SC1, <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/sc1>
- The electronic medicines compendium (emc), [<https://www.medicines.org.uk/emc>]
- British National Formulary, [<https://www.bnf.org/>]
- The Pharmaceutical Journal – ‘How stable are medicines moved from original packs into compliance aids’, Jan. 2006, Vol 276.
- Good Practice Guidance for Care Homes: Expiry dates for medication - Version 3 East Berkshire

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