

# SA Palliative Care Community Pharmacy Update

A joint initiative of South Australian Palliative Care Services

Patients receiving palliative care may develop swallowing difficulties. Pharmacists can offer advice for managing medications in these situations.

## Swallowing Difficulties

John is a 55 year old diagnosed with a head and neck cancer which he has chosen not have further investigated or treated. He is finding it difficult to swallow some of his tablets due to effects of the tumour in his neck. It is expected that John's swallowing will continue to deteriorate and medication adherence will be difficult.

### Shape

- > Determine if particular shapes are a problem. Change to brand with a different shape if appropriate.

### Size

- > Trial splitting tablets or where available, multiple tablets or capsules of a lower strength tablet if large size is a problem.

### Change Formulation

- > Dispersible products or oro-dispersing tablets with smaller particle size may help with swallowing.
- > Liquid formulations may be available. As they are often paediatric formulations, large volumes may be required to obtain an adult dose which may require frequent dispensing and can be unpleasant to swallow due to flavourings etc.

### Modifying Tablets or Capsules

- > Tablets which are not slow-release or enteric-coated formulations can often be crushed and mixed with other fluids or foods before swallowing.
- > Capsules can often be emptied and the contents mixed as above. Be aware that the slow-release or enteric-coats may be on the contents rather than the capsules.

## Therapeutic Substitution

- > It may be possible to substitute with a similarly acting medication with an appropriate formulation.

## Cessation

- > Regardless of swallowing problems, complete cessation of medications for long-term co-morbidities should be considered.
- > Be aware of possible drug withdrawal and rebound symptoms from this approach.

## Outcomes

- > Mirtazapine – changed to orally disintegrating tablets.
- > Esomeprazole – disperse tablets.
- > Panadeine Forte® – changed to alternative analgesic.
- > John to discuss cessation of other medications with his GP.

The next update will explore other issues related to John's medication use.

## Useful resources

- > [Don't Rush to Crush \(SHPA\)](#) – also available under 'Crush?' tab on EMIMS Product Information
- > [Medication cessation for adults in the last days of life fact sheet](#)
- > Also see [AMH](#) for information about rebound and withdrawal effects

### For more information

Contact the Advanced Practice Pharmacists:

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