

Self-harming and high-risk medicines – Guidance for Prescribers

How to use this guidance

This guidance is intended to be used to assist the prescriber when conducting patient medication reviews; when in consultation with a patient who has flagged as at risk of harm e.g. recent diagnosis of severe depression, or patient has recently self-harmed; or when starting a new medicine on the red or amber list in a patient who is known previously to be at risk of self-harm.

It is not designed to replace clinical judgement, but rather assist the prescriber in the decision-making process of assessing risk versus benefit of prescribing certain medicines to patients at risk of self-harm.

There are two factors to consider when prescribing medicines to a patient where it is felt they may be at risk of self-harming – the risk of the patient and the risk of the drug. In this situation it is advised to conduct a risk assessment of the patient and also a risk assessment of the drug.

Patient risk assessment

	No		Yes	Notes
Is the patient able to understand instructions about taking medication (mental health/learning disability/foreign national)	2	1 (some understanding)	0	
Does the patient have reading/literacy difficulties or difficulty following the instructions?	0	1 (some degree)	2	
Has the patient any history of drug/alcohol misuse?	0	1 (last 12 months)	2 (last 6 months)	Risk assess each drug individually
Has the patient any history of self-harming without drug/alcohol misuse?	0	1 (last 12 months)	2 (last 6 months)	Risk assess each drug individually
Has the patient a recent history of deliberate overdose?	0	1 (last 12 months)	2 (last 6 months)	Risk assess each drug individually
Does the patient have a history of mental health disorder?	0	1 (well controlled for long period of time)	2 (periods of instability and treatment changes)	
Have there been any concerns raised by other professionals in the past about this patient?	0	1 (longer than 12 months previously)	2 (within previous 12 months)	

0-4 LOW RISK

5-9 MEDIUM RISK

10-14 HIGH RISK

Assessed By:	
Date:	

If high risk patient, red drugs on the medication risk assessment list should be avoided if possible but if red drugs need to be prescribed, additional safeguards should be put in place, e.g. weekly scripts, or shorter script lengths. If high risk patient, caution is required when prescribing any amber drugs on the medication risk assessment list, and additional safeguards may be required.

If medium risk patient, consider additional safeguards such as shorter script lengths, more regular face to face medication reviews along with more frequent patient risk assessments.

Medication risk assessment

DRUG	REASON
RED DRUGS – These would usually be avoided where possible in a high-risk patient, without additional safeguards in place, and caution used in a medium-risk patient	
Opiates e.g. morphine, codeine, dihydrocodeine, oxycodone, tramadol	Danger in overdose - potential respiratory and CNS depression, and pin point pupils
Benzodiazepines and Z-drugs e.g. diazepam, temazepam, zopiclone	Danger in overdose - potential CNS depression
Tricyclic antidepressants	Danger in overdose – can cause fatal cardiac arrhythmias soon after ingestion
Bromocriptine	Can cause lethal circulatory collapse in overdose
Drugs with narrow therapeutic indices or toxic drugs e.g. lithium, digoxin, methotrexate, theophylline, colchicine	Danger in overdose Lithium may cause coma, convulsions, cardiac dysrhythmias Digoxin – may cause cardiotoxicity and ventricular arrhythmias Methotrexate – can cause pancytopenia Theophylline – may cause cardiac arrhythmias and convulsions

	Colchicine – may cause irreversible cardiovascular collapse
Clozapine	May cause coma and respiratory depression
Anticoagulants – NB warfarin toxicity can be reversed	Danger in overdose – will likely cause haemorrhage
Skeletal muscle relaxants e.g. baclofen	Danger in overdose – may cause CNS depression and convulsions
MAOIs	Danger in overdose. Can cause cardiovascular collapse, CNS depression, and possibly seizures following a period of patient being asymptomatic
Insulin	Danger in overdose – can cause severe hypoglycaemia and coma
AMBER DRUGS – Some risk and additional safeguards may be required depending on the patient risk assessment	
Antipsychotics (excluding clozapine)	Risk of cardiac and neurological complications in overdose
Venlafaxine	Danger in overdose – can cause seizures in a small number of cases
SSRIs	Fatalities uncommon if taken alone in overdose but have occurred when other agents are co-ingested. Serotonin toxicity likely if taken with other serotonergic agents
Anti-hypertensives	Danger in overdose Propranolol can cause sodium channel blockade and convulsions and sotalol can cause potassium efflux blockade

	Amlodipine can cause bradyarrhythmias and hyperglycaemia if pancreatic calcium channels blocked ACEI/ ARB Inhibitors/ Alpha blockers can cause severe hypotension
Barbiturates	Danger in overdose – can cause coma and respiratory depression
Quinine	Danger in overdose – can cause cardiotoxicity and ocular toxicity
NSAIDs	Risk of GI complications in overuse or overdose. Ensure patient understands directions for taking
Paracetamol	Danger in overdose and widespread knowledge of this
Iron preparations	Danger in overdose – can cause convulsions, reduced consciousness, GI haemorrhage, or haemolysis
Stimulants used in the treatment of ADHD (e.g. methylphenidate, dexamfetamine, lisdexamfetamine)	Danger in overdose – can cause hyperthermia, stroke, myocardial infarction, hyponatraemia, rhabdomyolysis, pulmonary oedema, hepatic and renal failure, and serotonin toxicity in severe cases

It is recommended that these risk assessments are carried out once per year as part of the medication review, or sooner if there are any changes to the patient's mental health status, or any new medicines prescribed to the patient which are categorised as red or amber on the medicines risk assessment

References

Five of the most deadly prescription drugs, Updated 21st March 2020. Available at <https://www.verywellmind.com/most-deadly-prescription-drugs-4083005>

The top 15 most dangerous drugs – Addiction Center, accessed 7/7/2020. Available at <https://www.addictioncenter.com/news/2019/08/15-most-dangerous-drugs/>

Toxbase poisons information database for healthcare professionals. Accessed 8th October 2020

Title	Risk Assessment Patient and Drug
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Previous version	Key Changes
1.0	Minor change to information regarding the risk for each drug as used Toxbase as the reference. Added specifically the risk of self-harm to the patient risk assessment.