MHRA Drug Safety Update

March 2023

MHRA Regulating Medicines and Medical Devices

Pholcodine-containing cough and cold medicines: withdrawal from UK market as a precautionary measure

Review of pholcodine
Pholcodine is an opioid medicine approved in adults and children older than 6 years of age to treat non-productive (dry) cough and, in combination with other active substances, for the treatment of symptoms of cold and influenza.

Previous reviews have examined the link between prior use of pholcodine and an increased risk of anaphylaxis during general anaesthesia involving neuromuscular blocking agents (NMBAs). The potential for cross-reactivity between pholcodine and NMBAs was added to the product information for pholcodine-containing medicines in January 2022.

The MHRA review considered the cumulative safety information. The Commission on Human Medicines (CHM) advised that there is sufficient overall evidence for an association with pholcodine, although the absolute risk of anaphylaxis remains very small in patients who have taken pholcodine. Anaphylaxis following use of NMBAs is roughly estimated as having an overall incidence of fewer than 1 case per 10,000 procedures.

Given the advice of the CHM, and the lack of identifiable effective measures to minimise the increased risk of anaphylactic reactions to NMBAs, pholcodine-containing products are being withdrawn from the market as a precaution.

Pholcodine-containing products have only been available in the UK for purchase in a pharmacy. Pharmacists should provide advice to those who have any concerns about their medicine or would like to seek advice on alternative medicines or management of their symptoms.

The MHRA scientific review took place alongside a review conducted by the European Medicines Agency, which also concluded that the benefits did not outweigh the risks

Advice for healthcare professionals:
• ask patients scheduled to undergo general anaesthesia involving NMBAs whether they have used pholcodine-containing medicines, particularly in the past 12 months, and maintain awareness about the potential for perianaesthetic anaphylaxis related to NMBAs
• do not dispense or sell pholcodine-containing medicines – consider recommending appropriate treatment alternatives for patients who present with a new dry cough or who are currently taking pholcodine
• report suspected adverse drug reactions to the Yellow Card scheme

Advice for healthcare professionals to provide to patients:
• pholcodine-containing cough and cold medicines are being withdrawn from sale as a precaution and will no longer be available from pharmacies
• if you are taking a cough medicine (including tablets and syrups), check the packaging, label or Patient Information Leaflet to see if pholcodine is a listed ingredient – if it is, and you have any questions, you can talk to your pharmacist who can suggest a different medicine suitable for you
• there is evidence that using pholcodine-containing medicines leads to an increased risk of the very rare event of an allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) in patients who receive general anaesthesia involving neuromuscular blocking agents (NMBAs) during surgery
• tell your anaesthetist before you have surgery if you have taken pholcodine, particularly in the past 12 months, or think you may have taken a pholcodine-containing product
• there is no increased risk of allergic reactions, including anaphylaxis, with other allergens following pholcodine use and the absolute risk in patients who have used pholcodine is very small, but patients should talk to a pharmacist, their GP or their surgical team if they have any questions