

MHRA Drug Safety Update

October 2021



Chloral hydrate, cloral betaine (Welldorm): restriction of paediatric indication

The paediatric indication for chloral hydrate (for children aged 2 years and older) and cloral (previously chloral) betaine (children aged 12 years and older) has been restricted to short term treatment (maximum 2 weeks) of severe insomnia only when the child or adolescent has a suspected or definite neurodevelopmental disorder and when the insomnia is interfering with normal daily life. Chloral hydrate and cloral betaine should only be used when other therapies (behavioural and pharmacological) have failed.

In 2009, following a national review of safety and efficacy, the authorisation for these medicines was restricted to severe insomnia that is interfering with normal daily life and where other therapies have failed, as an adjunct to non-pharmacological therapies. The MHRA has conducted a further review of safety and efficacy data. No new safety concerns were identified. However, in view of known carcinogenicity data in animals and because of concerns regarding the lack of long-term studies, a risk in humans in long-term use cannot be excluded on the basis of available data. As such, the Commission on Human Medicines (CHM) recommended that the paediatric indication of all chloral hydrate and cloral betaine products should be restricted to use only in children and adolescents with suspected or definite neurodevelopmental disorders, where the benefits of short-term use outweigh any potential risk. These changes reflect current clinical practice.

The product information is being amended to further clarify that use of chloral hydrate and cloral betaine is not recommended in children and adolescents except in these very restricted circumstances and should only be under the supervision of a specialist.

Maximum duration of treatment and other precautions

Prolonged use of chloral hydrate and cloral betaine has been associated with tolerance and the risks of dependence and abuse. The maximum treatment period for these medicines in all patients has now been defined as 2 weeks in the product information. Repeated courses are not recommended and can only be administered following medical specialist re-assessment. Following prolonged treatment, the dose should be slowly tapered before discontinuation to avoid delirium.

Advice for healthcare professionals:

- chloral hydrate and cloral betaine are indicated currently only for the short-term treatment of severe insomnia that is interfering with normal daily life and when other therapies (behavioural and pharmacological) have failed, as an adjunct to non-pharmacological therapies
- use of these medicines in children and adolescents is not generally recommended and should be under the supervision of a medical specialist
- following a national review of safety and efficacy data, the paediatric indication for chloral hydrate and cloral betaine has been further restricted to only children and adolescents with a suspected or definite neurodevelopmental disorder
- for all patients, treatment should be for the shortest duration possible and should not exceed 2 weeks
- repeated courses are not recommended and can only be administered following medical specialist re-assessment
- following prolonged treatment, slowly taper the dose before discontinuation – abrupt discontinuation can lead to delirium
- report suspected adverse drug reactions associated with chloral hydrate and cloral betaine to the Yellow Card scheme

Advice to give to patients and carers:

- chloral hydrate and cloral betaine are short-term treatments (maximum of 2 weeks) for severe insomnia that is interfering with normal daily life when other therapies (behavioural and medicines) have not worked
- The benefits and risks of these medicines have been reviewed in the paediatric population and the recommendation is that they should only be used in children and adolescents who have a suspected or definite neurodevelopmental disorder

Chloral hydrate has a RED traffic light status on the ELMMB formulary, i.e., prescribing by hospital specialist only (not to be prescribed in primary care). Cloral betaine is not on the ELMMB formulary