USE OF MORPHINE FOR PAIN IN CHILDREN

Information sheet for the community pharmacist

Recently there has been a change in practice in the management of pain in children towards prescribing morphine instead of codeine. The current clinical practice guidelines for pain management at the Hospital for Sick Children indicate that morphine is the preferred oral opioid in children instead of codeine. The purpose of this information sheet is to provide pharmacists with information on pharmacological strategies to optimize pain management in children and to answer some common questions about the use of morphine in children.

**General Principles**

**Prevent Pain when possible.**
- Pain is better prevented than treated.

**Give analgesics regularly.**
- For pain that is expected to be constant (e.g. post-surgical), analgesics should be ordered and given as scheduled medications.
- As needed dosing should be used for breakthrough pain only.

**Pharmacological Strategies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAIN SEVERITY</th>
<th>AGENTS OF CHOICE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mild pain</td>
<td>acetaminophen +/- NSAID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate pain</td>
<td>acetaminophen +/- NSAID + morphine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe pain</td>
<td>acetaminophen +/- NSAID + morphine or other strong opioid</td>
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</table>

NSAID - Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug

**Agent of choice for oral opioids**

- **Oral morphine is preferable to codeine** because it is more effective than codeine at providing pain relief.
- Codeine is metabolized to a small amount of morphine for its analgesic effect.
- Codeine is ineffective in at least 10% of the population who are unable to metabolize it to morphine.

**COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT THE USE OF OPIOIDS IN CHILDREN**

**Is it safe to give morphine to young children, even to neonates?**
Yes, morphine and other opioids can be given safely in children of all ages, including neonates.

To ensure opioids are prescribed safely in children, ensure analgesic dosing is calculated based on the child’s weight. Neonates and some ex-preterm infants are more sensitive to opioids, and dosing should be appropriately adjusted. (Refer to SickKids’ Drug Handbook and Formulary for dosing information).

**Can children become addicted to opioids?**
No, treating pain with opioids does NOT lead to psychological dependence or addiction.

**How can side effects of opioids be managed?**
Anticipate and treat opioid related side effects proactively. Most opioid side effects can be easily treated with simple interventions. Recommend a stool softener or laxative to prevent constipation, and anti-emetics and anti-pruritics as needed.

**Where can I found out more information on pain management in children?**

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Disclaimer: The information in this information sheet is accurate at the time of printing. It provides a summary of information about pain management and does not contain all possible information about pain management. If you have any questions or want more information about pain management, please contact the Drug Information Service at (416) 813-6703.