

Patient safety alert

04



Alert

2 September 2004

Clean hands help to save lives

Healthcare associated infection leads to the death of 5,000¹ patients and costs the NHS £1 billion a year. International studies show that infection rates can be reduced by 10-50% when healthcare staff regularly clean their hands² yet staff commonly clean their hands less than half as many times as they should³.

Hands are a repository for microbes which cause infection, but risks to patients are greatly reduced if staff disinfect or wash their hands between every patient contact.

Yet busy staff face practical difficulties cleaning their hands between each patient. An NPSA pilot with six acute trusts has indicated that when alcohol-based hand rub is provided at the point of care and supported by an awareness campaign, hand hygiene rises significantly.

The NPSA will be rolling out the 'cleanyourhands' campaign later this year which is estimated will save 450 lives and £140 million a year if the success of the pilot is replicated nationally⁴. For a trust with 500 beds this could mean savings of £460,000 a year, or a reduction in 1,540 bed days.

Action for the NHS

To reduce infection rates and prepare for the campaign, NHS acute trusts in England and Wales should:

- 1 Install alcohol-based hand rub at the point of care across their organisation by April 2005.
54% of trusts surveyed in England have already begun this work, and a further 20% plan to implement this in the near future⁵. See page 2 for more information.
- 2 Assess and manage the risks associated with the use and storage of alcohol-based hand rub. See page 3.

For response by:

- NHS acute trusts (including foundation trusts) in England and Wales

For action by:

- Directors of infection prevention and control in England
- Board leads for infection control in Wales

We recommend you also inform:

- Clinical governance leads
- Communications leads
- Directors of nursing
- Fire officer
- Finance directors
- Medical directors
- Modern matrons

- Patient advice and liaison service staff in England
- Pharmacy lead
- Procurement and supplies lead
- Risk managers
- Senior nurse managers, infection control

The NPSA has informed:

- Chief executives of acute trusts in England and Wales
- Chief executives/regional directors, directors of public health and clinical governance leads of strategic health authorities (England) and regional offices (Wales)
- Healthcare Commission
- Healthcare Inspectorate Wales

- NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency
- Welsh Health Supplies
- NHS Estates
- Welsh Health Estates
- NHS Logistics Authority
- Health and Safety Executive
- Health Protection Agency
- Royal colleges and relevant professional associations
- NHS risk management agencies
- Contracted alcohol hand rub suppliers
- Independent Healthcare Forum
- NHS Direct
- Community Health Councils, Wales
- Basic care services network chairs
- Independent Regulator for Foundation Trusts



1 Installing alcohol-based hand rub

The NPSA will be rolling out its clean**your**hands campaign to all acute trusts in England and Wales in phases throughout 2004/05. A set of awareness-raising materials that have proved highly successful in the six pilot sites will be made available. At the beginning of the pilot, staff were observed cleaning their hands between each patient contact an average of 28% of times. By the end of the pilot, they were cleaning their hands 76% of times⁶. This was achieved by using the campaign materials to raise staff awareness and by making alcohol-based hand rub easily accessible.

Practical benefits

The benefits of placing alcohol-based hand rub at the point of care are:

- it is quick to use, and can be applied without interrupting work;
- it reduces bacteria at a greater rate than soap and water, and does not need to be located by a sink; and
- it causes less irritation to the skin than soap.

In addition, international studies have identified clear links between using alcohol-based hand rub and an increase in hand hygiene compliance as well as a significant drop in infection rates⁷.

If the hand rub cannot be placed at each bedside, for example in paediatric wards, staff should be issued with personal dispensers which can be carried in the pocket or clipped onto clothing.

Please note that conventional hand washing with soap and water is more effective when hands are visibly soiled. Alcohol-based hand rub does not replace the need for conveniently located sinks in clinical areas.

In England the NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency (NHS PASA) has introduced a contract for a new range of alcohol-based hand rubs at competitive prices. The specification for the products was developed with international experts in hand hygiene, and numerous key stakeholders throughout the NHS. The range includes wall-mounted, bedside and staff-carried options. Every product has passed skin tests advised by dermatologists and conforms to the very latest European standards in efficacy. The range can only be ordered through the NHS Logistics catalogue to ensure quality, low prices and continuity of supply.

In Wales, Welsh Health Supplies is currently renewing its range of alcohol rub products. Further information is attached for Welsh organisations.

2 Assessing and managing the risk

There are risks associated with alcohol-based hand rub which need to be assessed and managed. Trusts are advised to action this alert in conjunction with relevant health and safety legislation. The three main risks are fire, ingestion and skin irritation. It is important to emphasise that these risks are greatly outweighed by the benefits in reducing infection rates.



Minimising the risk of fire

Although the NPSA is not aware of any incidents involving fire, alcohol-based hand rub is flammable. Trusts should refer to the *Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH)* regulations when storing the product in high volumes. See www.logistics.nhs.uk

Minimising the risk of ingestion

Children or patients in a confused state have been known to drink the product. The NPSA advises that staff use personal dispensers in paediatric wards and in other clinical settings where this issue is highlighted as a risk locally.

Minimising the risk of skin irritation

Allergic contact dermatitis due to alcohol-based hand rub is very rare. Staff who experience problems should be referred to their occupational health departments.

Next steps

Phase one of the NPSA's clean**your**hands campaign will begin in the six pilot trusts and will then be rolled out in four further phases to all acute trusts in England and Wales throughout 2004/5.

Trusts will need to be prepared to implement alcohol-based hand rub at the point of care across their hospital/s before they can participate in the campaign.

To register for the campaign, please visit www.npsa.nhs.uk. The closing date for submissions of interest for phase two is 24 September 2004.

The campaign is informed by the latest international evidence on hand hygiene compliance², which shows that the problem has to be tackled on a number of levels, and that only in this way can improvements be sustained. The evaluation of the pilot can be found at www.npsa.nhs.uk/advice

In May 2005, the NPSA will review how the action points have been implemented through the Safety Alert Broadcast System in England. Alternative arrangements will be made for Wales. Where actions have not been implemented, the NPSA will expect the relevant strategic health authority or regional office to provide a full explanation.

Existing guidance

At present, all NHS trusts in England and Wales are required to have in place policies for promoting timely and effective hand decontamination.

Trusts should refer to the Controls Assurance Standards (2003) in England, or the Welsh Risk Management Standards (2000) in Wales.

The new national standards in England also refer to hand hygiene (see Annex B, p47, target 15).



Further details

For further details about this patient safety alert please contact the NPSA patient safety manager in your area. You can find their contact details at www.npsa.nhs.uk/static/contacts

For further information about the NPSA's work on hand hygiene please contact:

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For further information on the new NHS PASA national contract please contact:

Richard Horsfall, Purchasing Manager
NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency
Tel: 01924 328 739
www.pasa.nhs.uk/handhygiene

For information on ordering arrangements in Wales please contact:

Tracey Prothero
Welsh Health Supplies
Tel: 029 2031 5500
www.whs.wales.nhs.uk

A copy of the alert is available at www.npsa.nhs.uk/advice

Footnotes

- 1 Improving patient care by reducing the risk of Hospital Acquired Infection, National Audit Office, 2004
- 2 Pittet D, Hugonnet S, Harbath S, et al (2000) Effectiveness of a hospital-wide programme to improve compliance with hand hygiene, *The Lancet* 356:12
- 3 For a summary of over 20 published studies, see: Center for Disease Control (2002) Guidelines for Hand Hygiene in Healthcare Settings: Recommendations of the Healthcare Infection Control Practices Advisory Committee and the HICPAC/SHEA/APIC/IDSA Hand Hygiene Taskforce
- 4 NPSA clean**your**hands campaign economic evaluation, Department of Health, July 2004
- 5 Hand hygiene initiative - research findings, by Exodus Research for NPSA/NHS PASA, 2004
- 6 NPSA clean**your**hands campaign pilot evaluation, July 2004
- 7 Larson E, Brayn JL, Adler LM (1997) A multifaceted approach to changing handwashing behaviour. *American Journal of Infection Control*. 25. 3-10

This patient safety alert is written in the following context:

It represents the view of the National Patient Safety Agency, which was arrived at after consideration of the evidence available. It is anticipated that healthcare staff will take it into account when designing services and delivering patient care. This does not, however, override the individual responsibility of healthcare staff to make decisions appropriate to local circumstances and the needs of patients and to take appropriate professional advice where necessary.

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