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Good Practice Guidance for Care Homes – Expiry Dates

Definition

The expiry date is the point in time when a pharmaceutical product is no longer within an acceptable condition to be considered effective. The medication reaches the end of its 'shelf life'.

Depending on the product, the expiry date may be set as a fixed time:

- Date of manufacture
- Date of dispensing
- Date of opening of the manufacturer's container

The shelf life of products is determined by either the break down of the active drug or by risk of contamination. Not all drugs deteriorate at the same rate.

This guidance is primarily for care home staff but also mentions good practice for the prescriber and community pharmacist.

Table 1: Examples of different wording of expiry dates

Wording on packaging	Action
Best before January 2020	Discard 31/12/2019
Use before end January 2020	Discard 31/01/2020
Use by January 2020	Discard 31/12/2019
Discard after January 2020	Discard 01/02/2020
Expires January 2020	Discard 01/02/2020
Use within one month of opening	Write date opened on the container and date expires
Discard 7 days after opening	Write date opened on the container and date expires

Key points for basic storage guidelines

- Keep all medication in the original container in which they were dispensed
- Keep medicines in their original outer packaging, to protect from sunlight
- All medicines should be stored in a dry place below 25°C, unless refrigeration is required (between 2° and 8°C)
- The manufacturer's stated expiry date of products can change once opened; record the date opened and the calculated expiry on the medicine package/label
- Be vigilant with product expiry dates
- Rotate stock ensuring the earliest expiry is used first
- Store as recommended by manufacturer
- Medicines supplied in a MDS should be discarded 8 weeks after dispensing.

Effects of using expired stock

- The active drug deteriorates (chemical breakdown)
- The effectiveness of the drug may change (reduction of the active ingredient)
- The breakdown products of the drug may be harmful to the patient
- Increased risk of contamination

Checking Expiry Dates

Care staff should check the expiry date of any medication before administering to the patient. With some medication opening the pack will reduce the shelf-life, such as with products used in the eyes (drops, ointments and creams). In such cases the date of opening must be written on the container and care staff should check this before use to confirm that it is still within its shelf-life.

Care staff should consider re-ordering a medicine if, on checking, it is found to be close to its expiry date. (Although the item may still be in-date it may expire by the time it is needed.)

Since 'when required' medicines may be used infrequently there is a risk that any stock may go out-of-date before it is used. They should, therefore be kept in their original packaging. (NICE SC1 - Managing Medicines in Care Homes, Recommendation 1.14.3¹).

Generally speaking, solid dose formulations have a longer expiry date than liquid preparations although certain external factors will cause deterioration – moisture, high temperature, exposure to air or light.

(See earlier - **Key points for basic storage guidelines**).

Some products have to be mixed with water before use, e.g. liquid antibiotics. These are stored in the pharmacy as a dry powder which is then reconstituted. The pharmacy label will state how long the medicine may be used for once it has been dispensed.

Any product whose appearance suggests it may be unfit for use should be discarded – irrespective of expiry date. If there is any doubt contact the community pharmacy for advice.

Expiry after opening

The manufacturer's expiry on a container is the **unopened** expiry date. Certain oral preparations have a shorter shelf life once they have been opened. This should be highlighted on the medicine label or container. Your community pharmacy may be able to supply you with 'date opened' labels.

The following list is not exhaustive and is only intended to cover some of the most frequently used products. Please add your own products as they become known to you.

Table 2: Examples of specific expiry dates once opened

Item	Shelf life once opened
Chlorpromazine Syrup 25mg/5ml & 100mg/5ml (Rosemont)	6 months
Gastrocote Liquid	1 month
Oramorph 10mg/5ml Liquid	3 months
Oramorph concentrated 20mg/ml liquid	4 months
Persantin Retard Capsules (dipyridamole MR)	6 weeks
Risperdal (risperidone) 1mg/ml liquid	3 months
Enteral nutrition examples	
Fortisip Compact	Consume within 4 hours or stored in a refrigerator for 24 hours.
Aymes shake	Consume immediately. If refrigerated can be stored for up to 24 hours
Calogen	Once opened can be stored in a fridge for 14 days
Calogen extra	Once opened can be stored in a fridge for 48 hours discard unused contents thereafter


¹ <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/SC1/chapter/1-Recommendations#care-home-staff-administering-medicines-to-residents>

Table 3: Suggested Expiry of Formulations from Date of Opening

Formulation and packaging	Suggested expiry after opening unless otherwise stated by manufacturer and still within manufacturer's expiry date*	Rationale
Tubs of creams / ointments	1 month	The contents are exposed and can become contaminated
Tubs of creams / ointments decanted from bulk container	1 month or seek community pharmacy advice	As above, and decanting from bulk container into another container could introduce contamination
Tubs of cream specially made for individual	Seek community pharmacy advice	Dependant on stability of product
Tubes of creams / ointments	3 months	Closed container, contents not openly exposed to environment
Pump dispenser packs of creams / ointment	Manufacturer's expiry refer to expiry symbol	Closed container, contents not openly exposed to environment
Tablets / capsules in monitored dosage systems	2 months	No batch number or expiry printed on MDS
Tablets / capsules / liquids decanted into pharmacy bottle	Seek community pharmacy advice	Dependant on stability of product
Part pack of tablets / capsules remaining in manufacturer's blister pack dispensed in pharmacy box/ dispensed in original pack	Manufacturer's expiry on blister. If no expiry visible contact community pharmacy for advice	Closed container, contents not openly exposed to environment. If no visible expiry there is risk that product may have expired.
Oral liquids in original container	6 months unless otherwise specified by manufacturer	Exposure of liquid to environment when dose is measured can introduce contamination
Enteral nutrition	See individual manufacturers guidance	Some products may be used for short periods after opening
Eye, Ear, Nose drops / ointments	1 month	Manufacturer's recommendation
Inhalers	Manufacturer's expiry / refer to dose counter if available	Closed container, contents not openly exposed to environment
Insulin	4 weeks for insulin vials and pens unless otherwise stated	The sterile seal has been broken and may be stored outside the fridge

*Due to the lack of available robust evidence on generic expiry dates of creams / ointments these expiry dates are suggestions



Some products now show an expiry symbol e.g. . However, in the care home setting where storage conditions may be variable it is recommended that the above suggested expiry dates are followed.

Any product whose appearance suggests it may be unfit for use should be discarded – irrespective of expiry date. If there is any doubt contact the community pharmacy for advice.

Good Practice for Care Home Staff

Receiving medication from pharmacy

- Check if there are any specific expiry date instructions e.g. some liquid antibiotics.
- Check the medication is still within its expiry date.

Storing medication

- Note and act on any specific storage instruction e.g. store in the fridge.
- Rotate stock so the earliest expiry is at the front and therefore going to be used first.
- Check expiry dates of stock monthly.
- Medication is to remain in the container in which it was received – batches must not be mixed.

Administering medication

- Check expiry date.
- Record the date opened **and the** calculated expiry on the medicine package/label where appropriate e.g. creams, eye drops. Some packaging does not allow for the pharmacy label to be placed on the product e.g. eye drops. In these instances the outer packaging will have to be endorsed with the date of opening. It is essential that the product remains in the outer packaging throughout duration of this treatment.
- Highlight any short expiry as a reminder to all staff.
- Any product whose appearance suggests it may be unfit for use should be discarded irrespective of expiry date. If there is any doubt contact the community pharmacy for advice.

Good Practice for Prescriber

Prescribing quantities

- Prescribe appropriate quantity of medication in order to avoid waste.
- Quantities ordered which appear to be excessive should be queried.

Repeat prescribing process

- Consider nominating a named practice member to process care home prescription requests and to act as contact known to the care home to deal with queries.

Good Practice for Community Pharmacy

Dispensing medication

- If decanting from bulk container, label with appropriate expiry date
- Shortened expiry dates to be highlighted
- Do not obscure expiry date with label
- If care home generally receives medicines in MDS, inform staff if a particular medicine is unsuitable for inclusion due to problems with stability. The foil packing around individual tablets must not be cut and placed in a MDS; doing so has potential to cause harm if inadvertently swallowed by service user.

Resources

Improving patient outcomes: The better use of multi-compartment compliance aids, Royal Pharmaceutical Society July 2013

<https://www.rpharms.com/Portals/0/RPS%20document%20library/Open%20access/Support/toolkit/rps-mca-july-2013.pdf>

Royal Pharmaceutical Society GB Handling Medicines in Social Care

<https://www.rpharms.com/Portals/0/RPS%20document%20library/Open%20access/Support/toolkit/handling-medicines-socialcare-guidance.pdf?ver=2016-11-17-142751-643>