

SA Palliative Care Community Pharmacy Update

A joint initiative of South Australian Palliative Care Services

Some patients will report being allergic to an opioid. What is a true opioid allergy and what is a safe alternative to recommend? These questions will be discussed over 2 updates

Steve's itchy story

Steve is a 56 year old man who was diagnosed 2 months ago with pancreatic cancer with metastases to the liver. His past medical history includes asthma as a child and is not on any regular medications.

Steve's main concern

Pain has been an increasing concern so his GP commenced morphine syrup 5mg every 4 hours. After taking a few doses he noticed having itchy skin with a rash that resembled hives. He also felt light headed with the need to sit down. He stopped using the morphine and his symptoms resolved within 12 hours without the need to go to his GP or to hospital.

What is an opioid allergy?

Opioid side effects can be grouped into 3 categories:

1. **Side effects with no immune reaction**, these include:
 - > Nausea/vomiting
 - > Sedation/ delirium
 - > Constipation/ urinary retention
 - > Respiratory depression
2. **Side effects that mimic immune reactions**; involve degranulation of mast cells and the release of histamine. Usually resolve within 12 hours causing minor distress to patient. Not a contraindication to re-trial of opioid. These include:
 - > Mild itching
 - > Urticaria
 - > Hypotension (caused by vasodilation)

3. **Immune mediated reactions**; IgE or T cell mediated release of potent immune mediators, can result in anaphylaxis. These include:

- > Bronchospasm
- > Cardiovascular collapse
- > Angio-oedema of face/ general oedema
- > Decreased consciousness
- > Severe skin reactions

Back to Steve

From the history Steve gave it seems he experienced a 'side effect that mimic immune reactions'. This reaction is idiosyncratic and may or may not appear with re-challenge of the same opioid. Future options include re-trial or swapping to a different opioid.

To be continued in part 2:

How to manage a true immune mediated allergy to opioids.

Useful resources

- > Smith W. [Adverse drug reactions - allergy? side-effect? intolerance?](#) Aust Fam Physician. 2013 Jan-Feb;42(1-2):12-6.

For more information

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