

RGH Pharmacy E-Bulletin

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A joint initiative of the Patient Services Section and the Drug and Therapeutics Information Service of the Pharmacy Department, Repatriation General Hospital, Daw Park, South Australia. The RGH Pharmacy E-Bulletin is distributed in electronic format on a weekly basis, and aims to present concise, factual information on issues of current interest in therapeutics, drug safety and cost-effective use of medications.

Editor: Assoc. Prof. Chris Alderman, University of South Australia – Director of Pharmacy, RGH
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Safety issues with drugs used in obesity management

At the end of healthy weight week and when New Year resolutions are kicking in, it is timely to review the safety of the three scheduled medications available in Australia with an indication for obesity. It should be noted that with all medications (orlistat, phentermine and sibutramine), lifestyle changes (such as increasing physical activity and reducing calorie intake) remain the cornerstone of management. None of these medications should be used routinely by patients with a Body Mass Index (BMI) of less than 30 (or 25 to 27 in special circumstances). In addition, phentermine is indicated for short term use only.

Sibutramine

Sibutramine is a serotonin and nor adrenaline re-uptake inhibitor and typical SSRI adverse effects and interactions have been reported with this drug. As with all sympathomimetic drugs, sibutramine can cause an increase in blood pressure and pulse.

On the 22nd January this year the Australian Therapeutics Goods Administration (TGA) released an ‘alert/advisory’ on the basis of interim safety results from the Sibutramine Cardiovascular OUTcomes (SCOUT) study. The SCOUT study was a randomized double-blind, placebo controlled study conducted over a period of six years, involving approximately 10,000 obese or overweight patients. These interim results showed significantly higher cardiovascular events such as heart attack and stroke amongst patients using sibutramine relative to those receiving placebo, with only modest weight loss achieved. As a result of this data the TGA has released a media alert and the approved product information for sibutramine in Australia has been modified to include data from this trial. The English and European authorities have suspended the marketing authorization for sibutramine as they feel the risks outweigh the benefits.

Phentermine

Phentermine is an amphetamine-like drug (users of this medication are often well aware of this) and thus can cause typical CNS stimulation adverse effects such as insomnia, hypertension, restlessness nervousness, agitation etc. Phentermine can also cause major cardiovascular adverse effects such as primary pulmonary hypertension and valvular heart disease. This agent is contraindicated for patients with significant cardiovascular or cerebrovascular disease. Additionally, phentermine can contribute to serotonin toxicity and should be avoided for patients taking other serotonergic agents.

Orlistat

Whilst available in Australia and elsewhere without a doctor’s prescription, use of orlistat is regulated via pharmacy only sales. Apart from obvious consequences of excess fat excretion and social difficulties arising from this, other adverse effects reported include headache, hepatitis and allergic skin reaction. Orlistat can reduce the absorption of fat soluble vitamins and can interact with some other medications (including the combined oral contraceptive, cyclosporine, anti-epileptics, thyroxine and warfarin) usually by affecting their absorption but in the case of warfarin by altering vitamin K absorption.

This E-Bulletin is based on work by Ruth Wilton, Senior Pharmacist, DATIS, RGH

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT THE PHARMACY DEPARTMENT ON 82751763 or email: chris.alderman@health.sa.gov.au
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