

Paraffin-based ointments and fire hazard: understanding the problem, navigating the media and currently available downloadable patient information

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News headlines have adorned the national press in recent days (March 2017) in the UK, the ‘headline’ act being the story ‘A BBC investigation has discovered that at least 37 deaths have been linked to the creams since 2010’:^{1,2}

The Independent newspaper: ‘Skin creams containing paraffin causing people to catch fire and die, investigation finds’³

The Metro newspaper: ‘Skin creams with paraffin in them linked to house fire deaths’⁴

The Sun newspaper: ‘WARNING Wearing skin cream in bed could lead to death in house fires, an investigation has found’⁵

The hazards of paraffin-based skin products have been well-recognised and action taken ten years ago, and subsequently updated. The British National Formulary was updated with warnings, and an investigation led to published guidance by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA).⁶ This guidance was updated in 2016, superseding the 2008 guidance.⁷

There is interesting video footage demonstrating the flammability of fabric impregnated with paraffin-based products.⁸

Advice for healthcare professionals and patients

1. These products are not themselves flammable.
2. Clothing or bedding covered in these products is at risk of catching fire and is the main hazard.

3. Advise patients not to smoke, use naked flames (or be near people who are smoking or using naked flames) or go near anything that may cause a fire while emollients are in contact with their medical dressings or clothing.
4. Change patient clothing and bedding regularly—preferably daily—because emollients soak into fabric and can become a fire hazard.
5. Very high-risk patients are likely to be elderly smokers, with even higher risk for those receiving home oxygen.
6. A patient information leaflet is available for download at: <http://www.nrls.npsa.nhs.uk/EasySiteWeb/getresource.axd?asetID=60275&type=full&servicetype=Attachment>.

Other information and resources related to this subject are available at: <http://www.nrls.npsa.nhs.uk/resources/?entryid45=59876>.

References

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