

Briefing for people who work in IEP services (and other workers)

Background

The supply of 5ml plastic ampoules of sterile water for injection is currently subject to disruption. This disruption affects the whole of the UK and is ongoing. Although NHS and others are working hard to sort this problem, it is not known when the situation will be fully resolved.

This is a concern as there are risks associated with using unsuitable choices of water to prepare drugs for injection. These risks include bacterial infections or if water sources are shared with other people then this may increase the risk of blood borne virus transmission.

What services need to know

All clients of the IEP service should be offered ampoules of Water for injection while they are in stock.

Services should not ration water and should continue to supply one ampoule for each injection even if stocks are running low.

Your local health board IEP contact will update you on the disruption to supply. There will also be alerts and updates through the NEO system so please ensure this is checked daily.

Alternatives to injecting should be discussed with clients. For those injecting heroin, smoking from foil is likely to be far less harmful as it eliminates all injecting risks. Please ensure you have a large supply of foil for this purpose. All IEPs should stock foil as directed by the national IEP guidelines.

For those areas participating in WAND, clients should be encouraged to use this initiative to ensure a full Assessment of Injecting Risk (AIR) is conducted, injecting sites are checked and in-depth advice is given.

If clients have shared sources of water, or any other equipment for the preparation or injecting of drugs there is a risk of viral hepatitis or HIV infection – advise to get a BBV test. If the client continues to share sources of water, or any other equipment – advise to get a BBV test every three months.

You should display a poster in your service explaining the hierarchy of water for injection. This will support the information staff provide but is not an alternative to speaking to people and explaining the issues. A poster is available from Exchange Supplies www.exchangesupplies.org/shopdisp_water_injecting_risks_poster.php

For Services in Glasgow and Clyde, all water risk posters and information leaflets for clients can be accessed by emailing a request to Margaret.bailey@ggc.scot.nhs.uk.

Hierarchy of Water

Your staff should understand the hierarchy of water and inform and explain it to anyone using your IEP service and especially people to whom you have been unable to supply water for injection.

There are different sources of water if ampoules of water for injection are not available. These are given below in order of preference – the most preferred first.

Boiled water left to cool

Boiling water will kill virtually all organisms, and is the advice to injectors who do not have an ampoule of water from injections.

Risks can occur if the water is not boiled for sufficient time – it should be boiled for several minutes. Boiling is problematic as the water takes time to cool and could become contaminated during the cooling process.

Boiling in a kettle may be faster than in a pot and be less problematic. The pan or lid used to boil the water could be contaminated in some circumstances. Ensuring that the containers used to boil the water have been cleaned prior to use can help to reduce these risks.

Cold water from kitchen tap

In Scotland, the kitchen tap in most cases comes from the rising main which is usually free from bacteria. Other taps in the house may be fed by water tanks in the roof or attic space where they could become contaminated with bacteria. This is not a problem for drinking it, as the acid in the stomach can kill low levels of bacteria.

Hot water from taps

UK hot water tanks and boilers do not heat the water to sufficient temperatures to kill bacteria. Also, the warming and cooling of the water can allow bacteria to multiply.

Bottled Water

Bottled water is marketed as pure and safe, a better source of water than our UK tap water however for the purposes of injecting, the bacteria count in bottled water is higher than UK tap water and can vary depending on the temperature at which it is stored or if someone has drunk from the bottle first.

THE FOLLOWING SOURCES OF WATER SHOULD NOT BE USED AND PEOPLE SHOULD BE ADVISED AGAINST USING THEM:

Part used ampoules of water

Because we market sterile ampoules of water as the “gold standard”, that can then lead to the thought that a part used will also be safe, sterile and free from bacteria however once opened the ampoule is no longer sterile and bacteria can enter. Depending on how the ampoule has been stored after opening this can raise or lower the risk of infection however not remove it entirely.

Toilet Water

The dangers of using water from a toilet may seem obvious however if water supplies are limited people may use alternative sources such as this. The risk of toilet water being contaminated by bacteria are high and vary in accordance with hygiene levels in the toilet itself.

Saliva

Your mouth contains over 6 billion bacteria of over 700 species. Using saliva for injecting, whether that be spitting on the spoon to mix substance, licking the needle or skin, bacteria can contaminate the injection allowing entry to the body where this can grow to dangerous levels.

Puddle Water

High risk of contamination from outside influences.

Shared cup of water

Open containers of water risk contamination by bacteria. If shared by many people this risk increases along with the potential to transmit blood borne viruses.

Any other liquid such as juice or alcohol

Only water should be used for preparing drugs for injection.

Bacterial Infections

You should be aware of the signs and symptoms of bacterial infection and the advice you should give to people who may have symptoms. You can access the National Wound Care Guide on the SDF Website or visit sdf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/National-Wound-Care-Guide.pdf