

ISMP List of *High-Alert Medications* in Community/Ambulatory Healthcare

High-alert medications are drugs that bear a heightened risk of causing significant patient harm when they are used in error. Although mistakes may or may not be more common with these drugs, the consequences of an error are clearly more devastating to patients. We hope you will use this list to determine which medications require special safeguards to reduce the risk of errors and minimize harm.

This may include strategies like providing mandatory patient education; improving access to information about these drugs; using auxiliary labels and automated alerts; employing automated or independent double checks when necessary; and standardizing the prescribing, storage, dispensing, and administration of these products.

Classes/Categories of Medications
antiretroviral agents (e.g., efavirenz, lamivudine, raltegravir, ritonavir, combination antiretroviral products)
chemotherapeutic agents, oral (excluding hormonal agents) (e.g., cyclophosphamide, mercaptopurine, temozolomide)
hypoglycemic agents, oral
immunosuppressant agents (e.g., azathioprine, cyclosporine, tacrolimus)
insulin, all formulations
opioids, all formulations
pediatric liquid medications that require measurement
pregnancy category X drugs (e.g., bosentan, isotretinoin)

Specific Medications
carbamazepine
chloral hydrate liquid, for sedation of children
heparin, including unfractionated and low molecular weight heparin
metformin
methotrexate, non-oncologic use
midazolam liquid, for sedation of children
propylthiouracil
warfarin

Background

Based on error reports submitted to the ISMP Medication Errors Reporting Program (ISMP MERP), reports of harmful errors in the literature, and input from practitioners and safety experts, ISMP created a list of potential high-alert medications. During June-August 2006, 463 practitioners responded to an ISMP survey designed to identify which medications were most frequently considered high-alert drugs by individuals and organizations. In 2008, the preliminary list and survey data as well as data about preventable adverse drug events from the ISMP MERP, the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Reporting System, the FDA MedWatch database, databases from participating pharmacies, public litigation data, literature review, and a small focus group of ambulatory care pharmacists and medication safety experts were evaluated as part of a research study funded by an Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) grant. This list of drugs and drug categories reflects the collective thinking of all who provided input. This list was created as part of the AHRQ funded project "Using risk models to identify and prioritize outpatient high-alert medications" (Grant # 1P20HS017107-01).

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