

Prescribing...

Glucosamine

- The evidence to support the use of glucosamine in the management of osteoarthritis (OA) of the knee is poor and is virtually non-existent for OA of any other joint.
- **NICE recommends that it not be prescribed or recommended, yet in June 2011 over £20,000 was spent on glucosamine prescriptions on the islands.**
- Doctors are requested to review all patients on glucosamine and where possible to stop.
- If prescribing remains truly unavoidable, consider a switch to the licensed glucosamine Alateris which is much better value.
- For patients with persistent painful knees requesting glucosamine for the first time, please recommend a trial of over-the-counter glucosamine.

What is glucosamine?

Glucosamine is an aminosugar and is chemically similar to glucose. Its therapeutic use in OA has been studied for many years but there is yet no accepted explanation of how it helps relieve pain in these patients. Commercially, glucosamine is made from the shells of crustaceans such as shrimps. So it should be avoided in people who are allergic to shell fish. Any improvement may take several weeks to appear and treatment should be stopped if no benefit is obtained.

What is the evidence to support the use of glucosamine?

1. Some years back small scale trials reported that glucosamine reduced the pain in mild to moderate OA in the knee. More recent larger well-controlled trials have found that it was no better than placebo. A trial of glucosamine in hip OA found no advantage over placebo, either for pain reduction or for joint function.
2. A Cochrane review, initially published in 2005 but updated in 2009 found no consistent benefit of glucosamine in pain, joint function or stiffness.
3. **NICE guidance on OA advised that the evidence for glucosamine is not strong enough to justify prescribing or recommending it.** However the guidance development group acknowledge that some patients may wish to trial it on an individual basis.

Which glucosamine products are available?

Glucosamine 750 mg and 500mg in tablet and capsule form were added to the prescribing list some years ago before the NICE guidance, but are unlicensed. These products can be bought for less than the prescription charge from many outlets on the islands. A licensed glucosamine, Alateris, containing 750mg of glucosamine hydrochloride in tablet form can be prescribed and is now recommended in preference to the unlicensed forms. It is licensed for the treatment of OA of the knee only.

At £18.40 per month, Alateris is much more expensive than the recommended first line treatments for knee OA, so please reserve it for patients exempt from prescription charges and for whom prescribing is truly unavoidable.

What is the cost of glucosamine prescribing at present?

Many glucosamine preparations are not at the moment identifiable via the EPACT system and appear in reports as "unspecified drug code" or "generic co bnf preparations". A manual check of these individual prescription forms found that at least **£20,000** was spent in **June 2011** on prescriptions for glucosamine. Many of these prescriptions cost over **£150 per month**.

If prescribing remains at this level, by Summer 2012 £240,000 will have been spent on a non-NICE approved medicine and as a result will not be available for patients requiring NICE approved medicines.

In the coming weeks and months, doctors are kindly requested to

- Follow NICE guidance and refrain from starting new patients on glucosamine.
- **Review all patients already on glucosamine in view of the advice from NICE and the extremely high cost of prescribing.**
- Remember that patients who pay prescription charges will find it more economical and possibly more convenient to buy over the counter glucosamine if they wish to continue.
- Consider a switch to Alateris in patients exempt from prescription charges **and** in whom prescribing is truly unavoidable e.g. where trials of first line therapy for knee OA have been ineffective or not tolerated or are contra-indicated.

Please contact me if you would like any more information.

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