Look-Alike, Sound-Alike Oncology Medications

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Confusing medication names and packaging may cause or contribute to potentially harmful medication errors. The names of several chemotherapy and supportive agents can look or sound like the names of other chemotherapy agents or unrelated medications and can be inadvertently interchanged, or mixed up. Poor handwriting, abbreviations of medication names, unclear verbal medication orders, memory lapses, and the large volume of medications currently in use are risk factors for look-alike, sound-alike medication errors. Risk reduction strategies include being aware of medications that look or sound like other medications, installing pop-up alerts in computer systems, prescribing medications by their generic and trade names, placing eye-catching labels and warning stickers on storage bins, storing medications in nonadjacent areas, and advising patients to be alert for potential mix-ups with look-alike, sound-alike medications.

Many medications have generic or trade names that can look or sound like the names of other medications. These “look-alike, sound-alike” medication names increase the risk of unintended interchanges or mix-ups of medications and may cause harmful medication errors. Several chemotherapy and supportive agents have names that sound and appear to be similar to other chemotherapy agents and, in some cases, look or sound like unrelated medications. Examples include similarities between the names of the chemotherapy agents carboplatin and cisplatin, docetaxel and paclitaxel, and vincristine and vinblastine. Doxorubicin has been confused with the antibiotic doxacillin, and methotrexate has been confused with methohexital, an ultrashort-acting barbiturate anesthetic. Look-alike, sound-alike errors cannot be attributed solely to similar medication names and packaging; additional root causes and contributing factors usually exist.

At a Glance

✦ Medication name and labeling confusion plays a role in as many as half of all medication errors.
✦ Look-alike, sound-alike errors cannot be attributed solely to similar medication names and packaging; additional root causes and contributing factors usually exist.
✦ Nurses, especially those who prepare chemotherapy in addition to administering it, play a major role in preventing or averting look-alike, sound-alike medication errors.

Several factors cause or contribute to errors involving look-alike, sound-alike medications. Poor handwriting, especially faint or illegible script, can lead to drug errors. Abbreviation of medication names can cause confusion regarding which of several similar-sounding medications is the intended medication. Similarly, chemotherapy treatment protocols stated as acronyms (e.g., CHOP, ABVD) can cause confusion. Referring to chemotherapy agents by their nicknames (e.g., “Donna” for daunorubicin, “epi” for epirubicin) has caused errors. Verbal orders involving sound-alike medications may be misinterpreted or misunderstood. Prescribers who place an incorrect prefix or suffix on the name...