

Hiccup in Palliative Care

Introduction:

Hiccups are forceful contractions of the inspiratory muscles produced by recurring, unpredictable contractions of the diaphragm. Hiccup lasting more than 48 hours is not uncommon in patients with advanced cancer and can be very distressing.

Assessment:

- Causes in patients with advanced cancer include:
 - Gastric stasis and distension (most common cause)
 - Gastro-oesophageal reflux
 - Metabolic disturbances (eg. uraemia, hypercalcaemia)
 - Infection
 - Irritation of diaphragm or phrenic nerve
 - Hepatic disease/ hepatomegaly
 - Cerebral causes (e.g. tumour, metastases)

Management:

- Treat reversible factors
- Hiccups often stop spontaneously. Treatment is only required if persistent.
- Try simple physical manoeuvres initially and those that worked previously.

Medication:

1. Prokinetic: domperidone or metoclopramide oral 10-20mg, 8 hourly.
2. Treat any gastro-oesophageal reflux with a proton pump inhibitor.
3. Dexamethasone oral 4-8mg in the morning may reduce compression/ irritation if patient has hepatic or cerebral tumour. Stop if no benefit after a week.
4. Other options for intractable hiccups supported by limited evidence include:
 - haloperidol oral 0.5-1mg at bedtime for under 2 weeks to avoid side effects.
 - baclofen oral 5-20mg, 8 hourly (avoid abrupt withdrawal).
 - levomepromazine oral 3-6mg at bedtime (now used as an alternative to chlorpromazine; avoid if hypotensive).
 - nifedipine oral 5-20mg, 8 hourly (avoid if hypotensive).
5. If other treatments unsuccessful and the patient very distressed, try midazolam SC 10-30mg/ 24hours via a syringe driver, reducing dose as patient improves.

Non-drug:

- Simple measures or 'home remedies' can be effective.
 - Sipping iced water or swallowing crushed ice
 - Breathing into a paper bag particularly if patient is hyperventilating
 - Interrupting normal breathing e.g. holding breath
 - Rubbing the soft palate with a swab to stimulate the nasopharynx
- Acupuncture may be effective.

Resources:

Professional: NHS National Library for Health

http://cks.library.nhs.uk/hiccups/quick_reference_guide

Patient: Leaflet

http://cks.library.nhs.uk/hiccups/patient_information

Key References:

1. Regnard C. Hiccup. In *Oxford Textbook of Palliative Medicine*. 3rd Edition 2004, p477-9
2. Back I. *Palliative Medicine Handbook* <http://www.pallcare.info/>

Further reading: see website