

Having a syringe driver

Information for people living with a terminal illness, and their family and friends



Care and support
through terminal illness

Ben Gold/Marie Curie



You might have a syringe driver for medicines that help manage pain, sickness, fits, agitation and breathing problems. A syringe driver is a small battery-powered pump which delivers medication at a constant rate through a small plastic tube under the skin. It's sometimes called a syringe pump or a continuous subcutaneous infusion.

It's common to feel nervous about having a syringe driver but most people find that they are very helpful for managing symptoms. If you have any questions or concerns, speak to your doctor or nurse. You can also contact our Support Line on **0800 090 2309***.

We have a short animation explaining how a syringe driver can be used – visit **mariecurie.org.uk/syringe-drivers**

* Calls are free from landlines and mobiles. Your call may be recorded for training and monitoring purposes.

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Brian Morrison/Marie Curie

What is a syringe driver?

A syringe driver is a small, battery-powered pump that delivers medication at a constant rate throughout the day and night. Your medicines are put in a syringe, and the syringe driver pushes the medicines through a soft plastic tube and into your body. The tube is usually inserted just under the skin on your arm, leg or abdomen (tummy).

Why is a syringe driver used?

There are lots of reasons why a syringe driver might be the best way to take your medicines. A syringe driver might be helpful if:

- you find it difficult to swallow tablets or liquid medicines
- your symptoms can't be managed with tablets or injections
- you're vomiting or you feel sick
- your body can't absorb medicines properly.

Syringe drivers are often used in the last few weeks and days of life, but they can be useful for managing symptoms at any stage.

What problems can a syringe driver help with?

Syringe drivers are often used to give medicines to treat the following symptoms:

- pain
- feeling sick and vomiting
- seizures (fits)
- agitation
- excess respiratory secretions (too much fluid in the lungs or throat)
- breathlessness.

Setting up a syringe driver

Your doctor or specialist nurse will prescribe the medicines that will best manage your symptoms.

Your syringe driver will be set up for you by your doctor or nurse. The syringe driver is usually set to give you your medicines continuously



Brian Morrison/Marie Curie

over 24 hours. The medicines will be changed or topped up each day by your nurse. Your nurse will change the tube every few days.

It might hurt a little bit when your nurse puts the tube under your skin, but after that, having a syringe driver should be painless. The medicines take three to four hours to reach a steady level in your body so you might not feel an effect straight away.

Your syringe driver will have an inbuilt computer and a small screen. It calculates the rate at which the medicines you've been prescribed should be given and displays this on the screen.

Having your medicines in a syringe driver shouldn't make you any less mobile than before. If you're active, you can carry it around with you in a special bag.



Kieran Dodds/Marie Curie

Things to look out for with your syringe driver

Your nurse will visit you and check the syringe driver every day.

You, your family or your friends can check the syringe driver on a regular basis too. Look out for any changes on your skin where the tube goes in, like skin irritation, redness or discomfort. Keep the syringe driver and your skin around the tube clean and dry. Your nurse will show you how to do this.

If your symptoms aren't under control quickly, your doctor can change your medicines.

If it stops working

If the machine stops working, don't worry, as the effect of the medicines will continue for a while. Call your doctor or nurse as soon as possible.

If the alarm goes off

The alarm will go off if there is a problem with the syringe driver. Let your nurse know so they can come and check it.

An alarm might just mean it needs a new battery. Your nurse will supply batteries and you may be left with a spare one. The syringe driver display will alert you if there are any blockages or leaks. Blockages can happen if you accidentally lie on one of the tubes, for example.

Taking care with your syringe driver

In general, syringe drivers are safe, reliable and don't need a lot of care, but it's important to:

- keep the skin around the tube dry
- if the skin is sore or looks irritated, contact your nurse
- if you drop the syringe driver, contact your nurse
- keep the syringe driver dry when washing – if you drop it into water, contact your nurse
- take extra care when washing and dressing – if the tube is pulled out, contact your nurse.

Can I have a shower or bath?

When you have a syringe driver, you can have a shower or bath. But you need to keep the syringe driver out of the water. Ask your doctor or nurse if you need help with this. They might suggest wrapping it in a plastic bag, placing it on a chair next to the bath, or having someone help you wash.

If you accidentally get the syringe driver wet, speak to your doctor or nurse as soon as possible. They will check that it's working or give you a replacement.

Common worries

Some people worry that having a syringe driver means that the person who needs it will die very soon. However, syringe drivers can be used at any stage of your illness. Some people just use them for a short time to manage their symptoms.

Although syringe drivers can be useful at any stage of illness, they are often used in the last few days and weeks of life. For example, when someone is approaching death, sometimes they stop being able to swallow medicines, or their body stops being able to absorb them properly. In this case, a syringe driver is often the best way to give them medicines to help them feel more comfortable.

Some people are concerned that having a syringe driver can make death come sooner. There is no evidence to suggest that this is true when they are used correctly. Syringe drivers are often used at the end of life because they are the easiest way to give someone the medicines they need to feel comfortable at that time.

It's common to feel nervous about having a syringe driver but most people find that they are very helpful for managing symptoms and give a feeling of reassurance.

If you have any questions or concerns, speak to your doctor or nurse. You can also call our free and confidential Support Line on **0800 090 2309***.

Did you find this information useful?

If you have any feedback about the information in this booklet, please email us at **review@mariecurie.org.uk** or call the Marie Curie Support Line on **0800 090 2309***.

How Marie Curie can help

We help everyone affected by a terminal illness get the care and support they need, whether you have an illness yourself or you're a family member or friend.

Marie Curie Support Line **0800 090 2309***

Ask questions and find support. Speak to a trained member of staff or a nurse for free confidential information on all aspects of terminal illness. Open 8am to 6pm Monday to Friday and 11am to 5pm Saturday. Your call may be recorded for training and monitoring purposes.

Marie Curie Online Chat

You can talk to our trained staff and get information and support via our online chat service. **mariecurie.org.uk/support**

Marie Curie Community

Share experiences and find support by talking to people in a similar situation. **community.mariecurie.org.uk**

Marie Curie Information

We have a range of free information available to view online or as printed booklets. **mariecurie.org.uk/support**

Marie Curie Hospices

Our hospices offer the reassurance of specialist care and support, in a friendly, welcoming environment, for people living with a terminal illness and their loved ones – whether you're staying in the hospice, or just coming in for the day. Our hospices also support people who have been bereaved, and some offer support for children.

mariecurie.org.uk/hospices

Marie Curie Nursing Services

Marie Curie Nurses and Healthcare Assistants work in people's homes across the UK, providing hands-on care and vital emotional support. If you're living with a terminal illness, they can help you stay surrounded by the people you care about most, in the place where you're most comfortable.

mariecurie.org.uk/nurses

Marie Curie Helper Volunteers

We know the little things can make a big difference when you're living with a terminal illness. That's where our trained Helper Volunteers come in. They can visit you regularly to have a chat over a cup of tea, help you get to an appointment or just listen when you need a friendly ear.

mariecurie.org.uk/helper

About this information

This booklet was produced by Marie Curie's Information and Support team. It has been reviewed by health and social care professionals and people affected by terminal illness.

If you'd like the list of sources used to create this information, please email **review@mariecurie.org.uk** or call the Marie Curie Support Line on **0800 090 2309***.

Notice

The information in this publication is provided for the benefit and personal use of people with a terminal illness, their families and carers.

This information is provided as general guidance for information purposes only. It should not be considered as medical or clinical advice, or used as a substitute for personalised or specific advice from a qualified medical practitioner. In respect of legal, financial or other matters covered by this information, you should also consider seeking specific professional advice about your personal circumstances.

While we try to ensure that this information is accurate, we do not accept any liability arising from its use. Please refer to our website for our full terms and conditions.

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Marie Curie – who we're here for

We're here for people living with any terminal illness, and their families. We offer expert care, guidance and support to help them get the most from the time they have left.

Marie Curie Support Line

0800 090 2309*

Ask questions and find support from trained staff and nurses.
Open 8am to 6pm Monday to Friday, 11am to 5pm Saturday.

mariecurie.org.uk/support

You can also visit **community.mariecurie.org.uk** to share experiences and find support by talking to people in a similar situation.

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