Learning Portal Lite: **Excipients**

This is a one-page summary; see the full version online

What are they?

An excipient is another name for an additive used in a medicine. Excipients stabilise a medicine, help with the manufacturing process, aid dispersion of the drug, or make the product more appealing to the patient. They are not intended to be pharmacologically active, but some patients have adverse reactions because of them.

Avoiding them

Some patients know that they have an allergy to an excipient or are intolerant to them. Other patients need to avoid them for personal or religious reasons (e.g. vegans, Jehovah's Witnesses). Many excipients are not exclusive to medicines and are also used, for example, as food additives and have 'E numbers'. Certain excipients can pose special risks in children.

Allergy and intolerance

Allergy is an immunological reaction which produces effects such as a rash. Intolerance is not immunological and can be caused by e.g. an enzyme deficiency which stops the body metabolising the excipient. Common excipients that patients may need to avoid include:

- Lactose
- Gluten (wheat)
- Phenylalanine
- Preservatives
- Latex
- Peanuts (arachis oil)
- Colourants

Questions to ask

When advising about managing a reaction to an excipient, your questions should include:

- What is the brand or manufacturer of the medicines involved?
- What is the suspected reaction to the excipient, or why must it be avoided?
- How can the reaction be documented so that the patient avoids future exposure?

Information sources

SmPCs via the emc and MHRA are the principal means of identifying excipients in medicines, but the SPS website has a number of useful pages about excipients too.

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