

Recommendations for Terminology, Abbreviations and Symbols used in the Prescribing and Administration of Medicines

Frequently Asked Questions

Question 1: Is it acceptable to use the \odot (circle with a dot) symbol when prescribing?

The 'O' in this symbol is derived from the Latin word 'octarius' which means 'a pint'. This symbol has been used to denote unit or pint and is still used for prescribing units of packed red blood cells.

There has also been a report¹ of a patient in a major Australian teaching inadvertently receiving 40 units instead of 4 units of insulin because the prescriber used this symbol to denote 'units' and the nurse and pharmacist interpreted the order as 40 units of insulin.

The use of this symbol is strongly discouraged in all circumstances, whether used for the prescribing of blood products, or, as in this instance, the prescribing of insulin.

(Refer to Principles 2 and 9 for consistent prescribing terminology of the Safer Medicines Group's 'Recommendations for Terminology, Abbreviations and Symbols used in the Prescribing and Administration of Medicines')

Reference:

Medication Safety – Australian Alert 42. Journal of Pharmacy Practice and Research. 2005;35(4):305

Question 2: I have always considered it best to separate numbers and abbreviations for units to improve readability, for example, 3 mg and not 3mg. Is this correct?

The Editorial Rules of the Australian Medicines Terminology (AMT), Release 1.1, published by the National E- Health Transition Authority (nehta) on the 17 December 2008 and available on Nehta's website (www.nehta.gov.au) stipulates the following in Appendix V - General Strength Formats:

Rule ID	Description
AMT-APP-STR-5	A space will be inserted between the strength value and the strength unit of measure. This space must be a non-breaking space to ensure that the strength value and the strength unit expressions are always kept together

In other words, you are right, there does need to be a space (equivalent to one letter), between the strength value and the units of measure.

Question 3: Is it acceptable to use the term m.d.u.?

The term 'm.d.u.' is a Latin abbreviation for 'More Dicto Utendus' which means 'to be used as directed'.

The NSW TAG Recommendations document includes the following general principles when prescribing:

1. Use plain English
2. Write in full - avoid using abbreviations wherever possible, including latin abbreviations.

Additionally prescribing medicines "to be used as directed" rather than providing explicit instructions to the patient and/or health care providers is inappropriate.

Therefore as the term 'm.d.u.' is a Latin abbreviation and also an inappropriate prescribing instruction it should not be used.