

# Patient Safety Alert

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**Item:** Shower curtains used in locked mental health units

**Specific Incident:** A VAMC reported that a patient in a locked mental health unit used the clear plastic, light-weight, bottom portion of a shower curtain (see Figure 1) to attempt suicide by suffocation. The patient ripped off the clear plastic portion from the heavier vinyl portion and wrapped the material around their head.

**General Information:** Many locked mental health units have shower curtains for patient privacy and for patient safety (e.g., to prevent water from pooling outside the shower, reducing the potential for a slip and fall hazard).

While the shower curtain involved in this event was a vinyl/plastic combination, totally plastic or totally vinyl shower curtains also present a suffocation hazard.

**Actions:**

1. By close of business (COB) October 17, 2008, identify all shower curtains in locked mental health units that are plastic or vinyl in any part of their composition and/or could be used for suffocation.

**NOTE: Removing the plastic and/or vinyl shower curtains without**  
**1) addressing the slipping hazard posed by a wet floor outside of the shower stall, and**  
**2) considering the preservation of patient dignity and privacy is not recommended.**

2. By COB October 31, 2008, identify safer alternatives to plastic or vinyl shower curtains that could be used to reduce the potential for suffocation. Acceptable alternatives are products that mitigate or reduce the risk of suffocation and are unlikely to pose any other hazards to patient or staff in locked units. Examples include, but are not limited to, the following:

- a. Cloth shower curtains - provided that they 1) have a suicide prevention track (i.e., a track that can't be used as an anchor), 2) are breakaway, attached with Velcro, 3) have Velcro tabs spaced at a minimum of approximately 12 inches apart (e.g., use only 3 Velcro tabs to attach a 24" wide shower curtain), and 4) have no more than 2 square inches of each Velcro tab in contact with the curtain. Note that meeting these requirements may require retrofitting commercial cloth shower curtains. Note also that the small number and placement of the Velcro tabs will cause the shower curtain to look saggy, but prevents the curtain from supporting a patient's weight. Additionally, since mold can grow on cloth easily, be sure to launder and/or replace the shower curtain as necessary.

- b. The Soft Suicide Prevention Door (SSPD) patented by Sheridan VAMC (see Figure 2 and [www.suicideproofing.com](http://www.suicideproofing.com)). This is a fire resistant, foam

core, Velcro-hinged door that has been designed to pull easily from the door jam when weight is applied. The vinyl covering the foam is securely attached. This door is available from Kennon Products, Inc. (800-356-0809 or [sales@suicideproofing.com](mailto:sales@suicideproofing.com)).

c. On new construction, when feasible, shower areas should be configured to provide privacy by design, such that shower doors or curtains are not needed.

**NOTE: Until the shower curtains can be replaced by acceptable, safer alternatives, implement interim measures to achieve an equivalent level of safety. Interim measures may include (but are not limited to): increased surveillance, additional patient assessments, or increased staffing.**

3. By COB December 12, 2008, remove the identified unacceptable shower curtains from service and replace them with acceptable alternatives.

**NOTE: Soft Suicide Prevention Doors are listed on the GSA Advantage website (<https://www.gsaadvantage.gov>) that lists approved products and services on GSA contracts. Consequently, the supplier may not be able to meet sharply increased demand for the product. Therefore, it is important that if this is the product you would like to use, order the product without delay. If the product is not available to be installed by December 12, 2008, then the product must be installed when it is received.**

**Addl. Information:**

People attempt or commit suicide because they have both the opportunity and tools (along with the will) to do it. Since systems or engineering fixes are not always 100% effective in eliminating suicide risk in this critical environment, patient supervision by qualified staff plays a vital role in mitigating risk.

The Environment of Care Checklist has been developed for locked mental health units in VHA facilities and has recommendations for reducing suicide hazards. For instance, it emphasizes choice of furniture, fixtures, accessories, etc. in bathrooms that do not provide anchor points. This includes interior doors where material (e.g., a cloth shower curtain) can be closed in the door and used as a ligature (i.e., noose). Standard interior doors, for instance, should either be removed or angled, or of a break-away type (e.g., the Soft Suicide Prevention Door).

A previously issued Patient Safety Alert addresses a suicide that occurred by suffocation from plastic: <http://www.patientsafety.gov/alerts/SoftskinAlert.doc>.

**Source:**

VA Medical Center

**Contact:**

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**Figure 1:**  
Shower curtain similar to that used in the  
close call



**Figure 2:**  
Soft Suicide Prevention Door (SSPD)

