

**Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for Patient Safety Alert AL11-02  
“Use of elastic-hemmed fitted bed sheets in mental health units and  
other units holding or treating actively suicidal patients”**  
(<http://www.patientsafety.gov/alerts/AL11-02WWW.pdf>)

Q1. We understand that Patient Safety Alert AL11-02 would apply to holding areas for suicidal patients within our Emergency Department; however, does Patient Safety Alert AL11-02 apply to areas where one-to-one continuous observation occurs, such as in two dedicated mental health/isolation rooms we have in our Emergency Department?

A1. No, Patient Safety Alert AL11-02 does not apply to rooms holding or treating actively suicidal patients that are assigned to have one-to-one (1:1) continuous observation. 1:1 continuous observation will mitigate the risk of the elastic hem in any treatment setting (e.g., Acute Care room with 1:1, Med/Surg room with 1:1, Emergency Department room with 1:1) because the patient is constantly watched. One-to-one continuous observation is defined here as continuous visual observation of the patient, with recommended staff distance from the patient of about an arm’s length plus 10 inches. It does not mean video observation.

Q2. Does Patient Safety Alert AL11-02 apply to those mental health units that are not locked?

A2. Patient Safety Alert AL11-02 applies to all mental health units, locked or unlocked, that are holding or treating actively suicidal patients and using the Mental Health Environment of Care Checklist to review their units for hazards. Mental health units and other areas that are not treating suicidal patients, such as some Dementia care units, do not need to comply with this Alert. The Alert applies to all areas where actively suicidal patients are held or treated that are not on 1:1 observation.

Q3. Should we also remove mattress covers with elastic hems at the corners (those that are the same style as elastic-hemmed fitted bed sheets) from mental health units and other units holding or treating actively suicidal patients?

A3. Yes, if you have any mattress covers with elastic hems at the corners (those that are the same style as elastic-hemmed fitted bed sheets) in your mental health units or other units holding or treating actively suicidal patients. Mattress covers that completely encase the mattress and are impervious to bed bugs and fluids are preferred. This item will be added to the next version of the Mental Health Environment of Care (MHEOC) checklist.

Q4. We have nylon laundry bags with elastic that hold the bag onto the hamper frame in our facility. What do we do about these?

A4. While we will never be able to, nor should we, remove all fabrics with elastic components (e.g., underwear) from mental health units and other units holding or treating actively suicidal patients, nylon hamper bags should be placed in a secure (e.g., locked) area so that patients do not have access to them. Nylon laundry bags themselves are a hazard as nylon is not breathable and can be used for suffocation.

Q5. We may already be compliant with Patient Safety Alert AL11-02 at the facility level, though how can we be sure?

A5. If you have only one supplier and model of fitted bed sheets, obtain a sample sheet and fully open up the hem in the corner of the sheet (i.e., an area most likely to have elastic). If there is no elastic present in the hem, then that fitted sheet is compliant with Patient Safety Alert AL11-02. If you have multiple vendors and/or models of fitted sheets, you will need to take 1 fitted sheet from each style/model (i.e., a test sheet) and fully open up the hem in a corner. If there is no elastic present in the hem of all of the test sheets, then the fitted sheets are compliant with Patient Safety Alert AL11-02. NOTE: Ensure that when new sheets are ordered, a sample sheet is tested for compliance with Patient Safety Alert AL11-02.

Q6. We plan on using both elastic-hemmed fitted bed sheets and non-elastic hemmed fitted bed sheets in our facility. What sort of system would work well to prevent the elastic-hemmed fitted bed sheets from being returned to or used in our mental health unit or other unit holding or treating actively suicidal patients?

A6. Color coding could be an option. If you have elastic hemmed fitted sheets, chances are they have white hems. Some of the non-elastic-hemmed fitted bed sheets have green or blue hems or different color stitching on the hems. Also, marking these sheets for the areas they are intended to go – in a very obvious way (not just on the tag) - is particularly useful, especially for those facilities that have their laundry done at the VISN level. Facilities within the VISN may wish to use the same marking system for consistency and ease. These measures would aid Textiles professionals to sort sheets appropriately and mental health and other staff to ensure they are receiving the appropriate fitted sheets.