

MedicinesTalk

Information for consumers and consumer groups about using medicines wisely

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Pharmacists: a great source of information

Community pharmacists (those that work in pharmacies or chemist shops) don't just sell medicines and put labels on them. Rather, they have much more to offer.

Pharmacists complete a university course learning about all aspects of medicines. After qualifying they must continue regular training and education to ensure that they keep up to date. As a result, pharmacists have a wealth of knowledge about medicines that we can make use of. All we have to do is ask.



Prescription medicines

Pharmacists are a great source of information about prescription medicines. They can explain just about anything about medicines, including

- what the medicine is for
- how it works
- what to expect when you take it
- what side effects and interactions to watch out for
- what to do if you think you may be experiencing a side effect or interaction.

They can also give you your medicine's Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflet. CMI leaflets give you

comprehensive but easy-to-understand information about your medicine and how to take it. They are written especially for consumers and can be obtained free of charge from your pharmacist. You can ask for the CMI leaflet when you pick up the prescription or at any other time.

Over-the-counter medicines

Pharmacists know a lot about over-the-counter medicines that can be used to treat common minor ailments, so they can help you choose a suitable treatment for minor ailments. They can also check [cont >](#)

that the chosen medicine does not contain the same active ingredients as any of your other medicines, and check that it will not interact with your other medicines.

Ask to talk to a pharmacist—there will always be one on the premises

Practical information about using medicines

Taking a medicine is not always as simple as it seems at first glance. For example, some medicines need to be taken with food, while for others it doesn't matter. Pharmacists can clarify any uncertainties you may have about the instructions for taking a medicine, including

- when to take it
- whether it should be taken with or without food
- any special instructions for taking it
- whether it needs to be stored in the fridge
- how to cut the tablet if you only need to take part of it.

Help solve problems

Pharmacists can help solve problems that may be making it more difficult for you to take your medicines. For example,

- if you're having trouble reading the medicine label, they can print out a medicine label in larger print, or they can print off the instructions in large print on a separate sheet of paper
- if you're having difficulty swallowing the tablet, they may be able to suggest another form of the medicine (eg a liquid form or a smaller tablet) that you can discuss with your doctor

- if you can't open the medicine's safety cap, they can put your medicines in a container that is easier to open
- if you're having difficulty remembering whether you've taken your medicines, they can put your medicines in packaging that holds each dose in a separate compartment (eg a Webster-pak).

If the pharmacist is not able to solve your problem, they may be able to ring your doctor to work out a solution with them.

Ask, it's free!

Pharmacists are probably the most readily available health professionals, because they are just behind the pharmacy counter, ready and waiting to help you. All you have to do is ask!

Most pharmacies have pharmacy assistants who help the pharmacist by serving customers, accepting and receiving prescriptions, dealing with basic questions, and so on. However, they are qualified to give only limited information about medicines. If you want information about your medicines, particularly your prescription medicines, ask to talk to the pharmacist—there will always be one on the premises.

Ask the pharmacist any questions you may have about your medicine and what to expect when taking it. Also, ask the pharmacist to go through the instructions for taking the medicine each time you start a new medicine, or each time the instructions change. Doing so, will help you avoid medicine-related problems and help you get the best out of your medicines.

Pharmacists can be a good first port of call when you don't know what to do about a medicine problem, or when you don't know if you need to see a doctor

about a problem. In many cases, they will be able to guide you. If they can't, they will refer you to your doctor, or they may even ring the doctor on your behalf, especially if the problem is serious or urgent.

For example, if you're not sure whether a new symptom could be a side effect to your medicine, you can ask the pharmacist for their advice. They will be able to tell you if it is a recognised side effect. They can also tell you whether you can wait for a few days before reporting it to your doctor or whether you should visit or ring your doctor immediately. ■



Ask a pharmacist!

These are just some of the questions that your pharmacist can answer. Some will be more relevant if you're buying a prescription medicine. Others will be more relevant if you're buying a non-prescription medicine.

- What is this medicine for?
- What is the active ingredient?
- What does it have in it?
- Is it OK for children?
- Is it OK for people with XYZ condition?
- Is there a generic brand with the same active ingredient, so I can save money?
- Can I have the Consumer Medicine Information leaflet for it?
- How does this medicine work?
- What can I expect to happen?
- Will I feel any different?
- How long will it take to work?
- How should I use this medicine?
- How much should I take? And, at what times of the day?
- How long do I need to take it for?
- How should I store this medicine?
- What should I do if I forget to take a dose?
- What about side effects?
- What should I do if I get a side effect?
- Are there any medicines I should not take at the same time as this one?
- Are there any special instructions? Eg, should I take it with food?
- How do I use this device (eg, a puffer or spacer)?
- I have trouble swallowing tablets? What can I do?
- I can't get the lid off the bottle. What can I do?
- I take a lot of different medicines at different times. Sometimes, I get them muddled up. What can I do?
- I don't see very well. Can you print off the label in large print?

Pharmacy medicines explained

Some medicines can be bought only from pharmacies, while others can be bought from supermarkets. But what determines where and how a particular medicine can be sold?

Buy at shops and supermarkets

Some medicines can be bought from all sorts of outlets, including supermarkets, health food stores and convenience stores. These medicines are considered to have relatively few risks associated with their use, and are therefore unlikely to cause harm when used as directed.

Buy at pharmacies

Other medicines can be bought only in pharmacies. These medicines fall into three main categories

- prescription medicines
- pharmacist only medicines
- pharmacy medicines.

These medicines can be sold only in pharmacies because they have more risks associated with their use, or because the condition they are used to treat is more significant.

You may be asked questions to ensure that the medicine is appropriate for you and your symptoms.

Advice from a doctor, pharmacist or pharmacy assistant

Each of the categories of medicines has a different set of rules that determine how medicines in the category can be sold.

The rules are designed to ensure that people get an appropriate level of advice and supervision for the condition being



treated and the medicine being bought. The rules also specify who can provide the advice: a doctor, a pharmacist or a pharmacy assistant.

Prescription medicines—as the name suggests—require a prescription from a doctor who diagnoses your condition before you can obtain the medicine and then supervises your treatment.

When you buy a 'pharmacist only medicine', you do not need a prescription but the pharmacist must be consulted. They may ask you questions to ensure that the medicine is appropriate for you and your symptoms, and that you know how to use the medicine properly. They may also give you advice about your symptoms, the medicine, other treatments, and what to do if symptoms persist.

Examples of 'pharmacist only' medicines include hydrocortisone cream (eg Dermaid, Sigmacort), which is used to temporarily relieve rashes, itching and other minor skin irritations, and clotrimazole, which is used for thrush (eg Canesten).

When you buy a 'pharmacy medicine', you do not need a prescription but the pharmacist or their pharmacy assistant

may ask you questions to ensure that the medicine is appropriate for you. They may also give you some advice.

Examples of 'pharmacy medicines' include the anti-diarrhoea medicine loperamide (eg Diacare, Imodium, Gastrostop in small packets), and the anti-histamine loratadine (Alledine, Allereze, Claratyne, Lorastyne).

Some of the questions you may be asked by the pharmacist or pharmacy assistant, and the reasons for asking them are outlined below. The questions asked will depend on your symptoms and the medicine being bought. All are intended to determine that the treatment is appropriate for you, and to prevent any problems that could arise from inappropriate use of the medicine. ■

Questions you might be asked by the pharmacist or their pharmacy assistant

Question	Reason for asking	Example
Who is the medicine for?	To make sure the information and advice given is relevant to the person using the medicine.	Ibuprofen (eg Nurofen, Advil) is not suitable for pregnant women.
What are your symptoms?	To make sure the medicine is appropriate for the symptoms.	
For how long have you had symptoms?	To determine if you should see a doctor instead of taking an over-the-counter medicine.	Someone who needs to take antacids frequently for heartburn may have a more serious problem, such as a stomach ulcer.
Are you taking any other medicines?	To ensure that the medicine will not interact with your other medicines.	Some cough and cold products contain ingredients that can make some blood pressure medicines work less well.
	To make sure that you are not taking another medicine with the same active ingredient, thus potentially taking a double dose.	Many medicines contain paracetamol. By taking two medicines that contain paracetamol, you could unintentionally take more than the maximum daily dose, which could be harmful.
Do you have any other medical conditions?	To make sure that the medicine will not make your other conditions worse.	Painkillers such as ibuprofen can be dangerous for older people with certain heart conditions and some people with asthma.

Generic medicines campaign

In July and October 2008, the National Prescribing Service ran a series of television advertisements designed to inform people about generic medicines. The advertisements highlighted the facts about generic medicines and encouraged people to learn more about them.

Same active ingredient

Generic medicines contain the same active ingredient as the original brand medicine. The active ingredient of a medicine is the chemical that makes the medicine work as intended.

Manufacturers of generic medicines must prove that the generic version of a medicine has the same intended effect on the body as the original brand medicine for it to be placed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS).

Generic medicines must be manufactured using the same stringent Australian Government standards as the original brand medicine.

Generic medicines may look different

Generic medicines may be a different size, shape or colour from the original brand medicine, because the inactive ingredients, the fillers, coatings and so on, may be different from those in the original brand medicine. Generic medicines also usually have different packaging from the original brand medicine.

Using generic medicines

If you are considering changing to a generic medicine, talk to your GP or pharmacist first. They will know if there is a generic version available and whether it is suitable for you.



Some medicines have several generic brands. If you decide to switch to a generic brand, it may be best to stick with that brand to avoid confusion and the possibility of taking two versions of the same medicine at the same time.

Find out the name of the active ingredient of your medicine, and record it on your medicines list. Keep the list in your wallet or handbag, so you have it with you when you need it. If you don't know the name of the active ingredient, ask your pharmacist to show you how to find it on the medicine's label.

Information about your medicines

For more information about your medicines and their active ingredients

- talk to your doctor or pharmacist
- telephone Medicines Line (see back page) on 1300 888 763
- ask for the medicine's Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflet (see back page).

Information about generic medicines

For information about generic medicines

- talk to your doctor or pharmacist
- telephone Medicines Line (see back page) on 1300 888 763
- visit the generic medicines website at www.nps.org.au/genericmedicines

- ring the Council on the Ageing in your state to arrange a free 'Brand name or generic medicine—choosing wisely' information session for your seniors group
- read the new fact sheet 'Know the active ingredient', which is available at www.nps.org.au/consumers/publications/factsheets. ■

New leaflet

In the past, many people with heart conditions were advised to take antibiotics before undergoing dental work or surgery in order to prevent an infection of the heart known as infective endocarditis.

However, research has shown that only people with certain heart conditions need to take antibiotics, and then only before some types of dental work or surgery.

If you have a heart condition and you have previously been advised to take antibiotics before dental or surgical work, your doctor or dentist will tell you if you still need to take them. They can also answer any questions you may have.

For more information, the National Prescribing Service has just produced a new information leaflet, 'Preventing infections of the heart', in easy-to-understand language.

The leaflet explains infective endocarditis, what causes it, and which heart conditions and types of surgical or dental work might require you to take antibiotics beforehand.

The leaflet can be downloaded from www.nps.org.au/consumers. Click on 'Publications' then 'Factsheets'. ■

Quick quiz

Test your knowledge of the quality use of medicines issues covered in this edition of *MedicinesTalk*.

Are the following statements **true or false**? Answers on back page.

1. Medicines you can buy at supermarkets have relatively few risks.
2. Generic medicines work in the same way as the medicine they replace.
3. Pharmacists can give advice about non-prescription medicines.
4. People with heart conditions should take antibiotics before going to the dentist. ■



NPS

National Prescribing Service Limited

Medicines Line
1300 888 763
Independent information

Useful information

Medicines Line

Ring Medicines Line on 1300 888 763 to talk to a pharmacist about your prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines for the cost of a local call (calls from mobiles may cost more). The service is open 9 am–6 pm Monday–Friday (EST).

CMI leaflet

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets have been written for most prescription and many non-prescription medicines. The leaflets explain how the medicine works, how and when to take it, common side effects and potential interactions. Obtain the CMI leaflet for your medicine from your pharmacist, Medicines Line or the NPS website (www.nps.org.au/consumers).

Home Medicines Review

A Home Medicines Review involves a pharmacist visiting your home to check and discuss all your medicines. The visit is organised in consultation with your GP, who receives a report afterwards. Talk to your GP or pharmacist if you want to find out more about Home Medicines Reviews.

NPS Medicines List

Use an NPS Medicines List to keep an up-to-date record of all your medicines. Keep it with you at all times for emergencies, and take it whenever you go to a doctor, pharmacist, health centre or hospital. The list is available in English, traditional and simplified Chinese, Greek, Italian and Vietnamese. Order a copy free of charge from the NPS website (www.nps.org.au/consumers).

Questions to ask about your medicines (new)

A reminder list of questions to ask your doctor or pharmacist is available in English (as a fact sheet) and in traditional and simplified Chinese and Italian (as a wallet-sized list). Order a copy free of charge from the NPS website (www.nps.org.au/consumers).

HealthInsite

HealthInsite (www.healthinsite.gov.au) is the Australian Government website that links you to hundreds of reputable health information websites providing information about medicines, medical conditions and staying healthy.

1. True. They are unlikely to cause harm if used as directed, but all medicines, including alternative medicines, have some risks. For example, they may cause side effects or interactions in some people, or be harmful if over-used. 2. True. They can have the same intended effect in the body as the original brand. 3. True. They can also give advice about prescription medicines. 4. Only true for people with certain heart conditions. To find out more, ask your doctor or dentist, or obtain the National Prescribing Service's leaflet 'Preventing infections of the heart'.

Who writes MedicinesTalk

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All due care is taken to provide accurate and reliable information. However, the information in MedicinesTalk is not medical advice, so seek professional help before mak-

ing decisions. Opinions expressed in MedicinesTalk are not necessarily those of the editors or NPS.

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