

MedicinesTalk

Information for consumers and consumer groups about using medicines wisely

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Keeping a lid on medicine costs

Medicines can consume a substantial chunk of your budget, especially if you're taking several medicines. However, there are ways of reducing your spending on medicines without compromising your health.

Have your medicines reviewed

If you've been taking several medicines for some time, a review of your medicines may show that you no longer need all of them. It may also show that you're taking more than you need of one or more of them. Stopping any unneeded medicines will save you money and reduce your chances of medication problems.

Your GP can review your medicines, or they can arrange for specially qualified pharmacist to conduct a Home Medicines Review (see back page). For more information, talk to your GP or pharmacist.

Consider generic medicines

When a medicine is first released, it is only available in a brand version. Once the patent for the medicine has expired, other companies can make copies of it. These copies are known as generic medicines.



Generic versions of a medicine contain the same active ingredient, work in the same way, and must meet the same quality standards as the original brand medicine.

Companies sometimes charge higher prices for brand medicines, so a generic version may save you money.

In the case of prescription medicines, an extra charge, known as a brand premium, may be added to the standard charge for a prescription. For example, a prescription medicine with a brand premium of \$4.00 will cost concession card holders \$9.00 compared with \$5.00 for the generic version. For other people, the [cont >](#)

brand medicine will cost a maximum of \$35.30 compared with a maximum of \$31.30 for the generic version.

If you want to consider changing to a generic version of your prescription medicine, talk to your doctor or pharmacist.

Ask the pharmacist if there are less expensive versions of your medicines.

You can also save money by thinking about which brands of over-the-counter medicines you use. For example, well known brand painkillers such as Panadol (paracetamol) and Nurofen (ibuprofen) can be 2–3 times more expensive than some of the lesser known brands that contain the same active ingredient.

If you want to find out if there's a less expensive version of your medicine, talk to your pharmacist.

Check out the Safety Net

The Safety Net allows people who have spent more than a certain amount on medicines in a calendar year to get their prescription medicines cheaper or free of charge for the rest of the year.

To be eligible for the Safety Net, you must have a record of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS)

medicines you buy on a prescription record form. You can get the form from any pharmacy. If you have a family, ask the pharmacist about combining all your family members' medicines on one form.

If you buy your medicines from different pharmacies, you will need to give the prescription record form to the pharmacist every time you buy your prescription medicines. They will enter the details of your medicines on the form.

If you always go to the same pharmacy, ask the pharmacist if they can keep the record of your medicines for you.

When you or your family have spent more than the threshold (minimum) amount on medicines in a calendar year, you will become eligible for a Safety Net card. The card will entitle you to cheaper or free medicines for the rest of the calendar year (Table 1).

If you buy any medicines with a brand premium, the brand premium will not count towards your Safety Net threshold. You will also have to pay the brand premium if you buy such medicines with a Safety Net card.

For more information about the Safety Net, talk to your pharmacist.

Ask about a different strength medicine

Many medicines come in different strengths, so sometimes you can save money by buying a different strength of the medicine.

For example, if you usually take two 100 mg tablets of a medicine at a time, and a 200 mg strength is available, you may be able to take

Table 1. Safety Net thresholds and prescription costs in 2008

	Spending needed to reach Safety Net threshold	Cost of prescription with Safety Net Card
Concession card holders	\$290.00	Free
Other patients	\$1141.80	\$5.00

just one 200 mg tablet at a time. This may mean that you need fewer prescriptions, which will save you money.

If this situation may apply to you, talk to your doctor.

Ask about an authority prescription

Doctors can prescribe some people more medicine than is normally allowed under a Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) prescription by using a special prescription known as an authority prescription.

For example, if you're taking double the normal dose of a medicine, your doctor may be able to obtain permission to prescribe that dose for you on an authority prescription. This will mean that you can buy twice the amount normally allowed on a prescription for the cost of a normal prescription.

This will save you money, because you will use fewer prescriptions, and you will not have to visit the doctor as often to obtain prescriptions.

If this situation applies to you, ask your doctor if an authority prescription might be appropriate.

For more information about authority prescriptions, see page 4.

Ask about getting your medicine on prescription instead

In some cases, you can save money by buying a medicine on prescription rather than over the counter from a pharmacy or supermarket. This situation is more likely to apply if you are a concession card holder.

For example, if you use the full dose (6–8 tablets per day) of



paracetamol (Panadol, Panamax, Tylenol, Dymadon P, etc) regularly for chronic arthritis pain, you may save money by buying the paracetamol on prescription. A prescription will allow you to buy 300 paracetamol tablets (equivalent of three packets of 100 tablets) for \$5.00 if you're a concession card holder. Buying medicines on prescription also allows you to count the cost of the medicine towards your Safety Net tally, so you will reach the Safety Net threshold sooner.

If you use an over-the-counter medicine regularly, ask your doctor if it's available on prescription.

Talk to your doctor and pharmacist

If you're having difficulties with the cost of your medicines, it might be time to swallow your pride and tell your doctor and pharmacist. They may not be aware of your financial situation, and they may be able to suggest other ways you can save money on your medicines. ■

Authority prescriptions explained

Your doctor says that your medicine needs an authority prescription. What do they mean?

Authority prescriptions are used for selected Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) medicines that are intended only for people with specific health conditions. They may also be used when people need more medicine than normal.

To obtain an authority prescription, you must meet certain requirements.

Authority prescriptions enable you to obtain such medicines for the cost of a standard PBS prescription (\$5 for concession card holders and up to \$31.30 for other people). However, you must meet certain eligibility requirements, and your doctor must write the prescription on a special PBS–RPBS authority prescription form.

Once your doctor has given you an authority prescription, you can give the form to the pharmacist as you would any other prescription.

Authority only medicines

An example of an authority prescription medicine is alendronate 70 mg (eg Fosamax Once Weekly and Alendro Once Weekly), which is used for the fragile bone condition osteoporosis. To be eligible for an authority prescription of alendronate, you must meet one of the two following conditions

- have osteoporosis and have had a broken bone caused by minimal trauma

- be aged 70 years and over and have very low bone mineral density.

Larger quantities or more repeats

You may also be eligible for an authority prescription if you need a higher dose of a medicine than a normal PBS prescription allows, or if you need more repeats than a normal PBS prescription allows.

For example, if you're taking double the normal dose of a medicine, your doctor may be able to obtain permission to prescribe that dose for you on an authority prescription. This will mean that you can buy twice the amount normally allowed on a prescription for the cost of a normal prescription.

Approval

All authority prescriptions require approval from the government. In some cases, the doctor simply has to enter a special code on an authority prescription form to indicate that you meet the eligibility requirements for the medicine. In other cases, they must obtain approval over the telephone. In almost all cases, this approval is immediate.

If you don't meet the authority prescription eligibility requirements for a medicine, your doctor can only prescribe the medicine for you on a private prescription (see back page). This means that you will pay the full price for the medicine, which is usually much more than the standard PBS price.

For more information, talk to your pharmacist or doctor. ■

Prescription and other medicines: Not always a good combination

When taking over-the-counter medicines, most of us don't tend to think about the possibility of them interacting with our prescription medicines, but we should.

Over-the-counter medicines contain active ingredients that make the medicine work as intended. These active ingredients can interact with the active ingredients of any other medicine—be it a vitamin or a herbal, natural, over-the-counter or prescription medicine.

The more medicines you take, the greater the risk of interactions. Older people are also more at risk, because their bodies tend not to handle medicines as well as younger people.

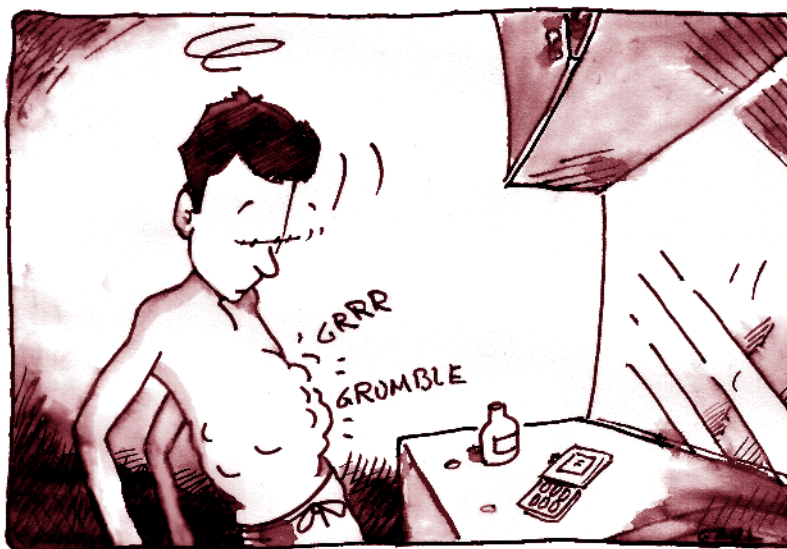
Examples of interactions

St John's wort can interact with some antidepressant medicines to cause a potentially dangerous reaction.

Taking aspirin at the same time as another blood-thinning medicine such as warfarin can result in an increased risk of unwanted bleeding.

Taking an antacid such as Mylanta, Gaviscon or Quick-Eze at the same time as some antibiotics can reduce the absorption of the antibiotic into the body. This can result in the antibiotic being less effective in fighting the infection for which it was intended.

Some anti-inflammatory medicines available over the counter, such as ibuprofen (eg Nurofen) and naproxen (eg Naprogesic), can interact with blood-pressure tablets



to make them less effective, which may result in a rise in blood pressure.

Avoiding interactions

Whenever your doctor or pharmacist recommends or sells you a new medicine, tell them about all the other medicines you are taking, including any over-the-counter, natural and herbal medicines.

Keeping a list of all your medicines and carrying it around with you will make this task easier, because you can refer to it or give it to them.

When you buy over-the-counter medicines, read the label. It will tell you about the main medicine combinations to avoid. Similarly, for prescription medicines, check the Consumer Medicine Information leaflet (see back page). Or, check with a doctor or pharmacist. ■

Over-the-counter medicines are medicines that you can buy without a prescription at pharmacies, supermarkets, convenience stores, etc.

Information about new medicines

Sometimes, newly released medicines provide better and safer treatments than older ones. However, often, they are no better or worse—just different.

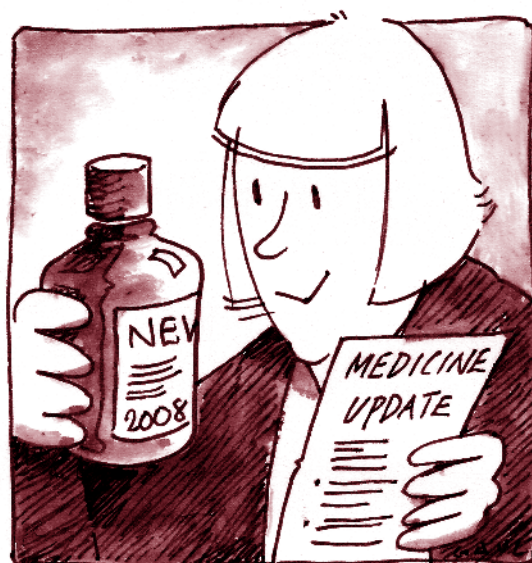
Because new medicines have not been used by as many people, and they have not been used for prolonged periods, much less is usually known about their benefits, side effects and safety than is the case with older medicines.

Therefore, deciding to use a new medicine involves you and your doctor weighing up what is known about the medicine's expected benefits and risks in the light of your circumstances. But, where can you get that information?

The first source of information should be your doctor. Discuss with them the known benefits and risks of the medicine, whether they recommend it for you, and their reasons for doing so.

The second source of information might be a Medicine Update leaflet provided by the National Prescribing Service. These leaflets are written especially for consumers. They provide information about some medicines that have become available recently on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), or whose eligibility requirements under the PBS have changed recently. Topics covered include

- how the medicine is used in treatment, including who is most likely to benefit from it
- restrictions on the medicine's use and the reasons for those restrictions



- how the medicine works
- other ways of treating the condition
- side effects of the medicine
- how the medicine compares with other treatments
- important safety instructions.

Medicine Updates are a new service, so only a few medicines have leaflets written for them. Three or four new leaflets will be written each year. The medicines for which Medicine Update leaflets exist are

- alendronate (eg Fosamax Once-Weekly and Alendro Once-Weekly) and its use in treating osteoporosis and preventing broken bones in people with fragile bones (very low bone mineral density)
- fluticasone with salmeterol (Seretide) and its use in treating chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- varenicline (Champix), a new smoking cessation drug.

The leaflets are available at www.nps.org.au/consumers. ■

Medicines Line answers your questions

Each day, scores of people ask the pharmacists at Medicines Line (see back page) questions about their medicines. Here are two recent examples.

Q I'm 28 and I have bipolar disorder (a type of depression). I take valproate for it. I want to know if it's safe for me to take cold and flu tablets when I have a cold.

A Don't forget that simple things like getting plenty of rest and fluids will help you get over a cold—and they won't interact with valproate! Nevertheless, there is a wide range of cold and flu products. These can relieve some of the symptoms of a cold (but they don't treat the infection itself). Most products contain several ingredients. Common ingredients that are safe for you to use short term in conjunction with valproate include

- paracetamol for pain or a high temperature
- phenylephrine for a blocked nose (comes in tablets, capsules and nasal sprays)
- an antihistamine such as dexchlorpheniramine for a runny or blocked nose.

Ask the pharmacist which products contain these ingredients.

Q I'm the legal guardian for my sister who lives in a hostel. I pay her pharmacy bills. She seems to be receiving a long list of medicines each month, but I don't understand what they're for and why she needs so many! Is there any way that we can save some money?

A Make sure that the pharmacist knows that you're worried about your sister's pharmacy bills. Discuss with them the option of using generic medicines (see page 1) where possible. Ask her doctor for a Home Medicines Review (see page 1) to check that she still needs all her medicines. Also, check that the pharmacy is keeping a prescription record form for her so she's covered by the Safety Net (see page 2). ■



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?

1. You must keep a prescription record form to be able to get free or cheaper prescription medicines under the PBS Safety Net.
2. You have to pay more for authority prescriptions.
3. If you choose a more expensive brand of medicine, or if your doctor prescribes one, the extra amount you pay won't count towards your PBS Safety Net.
4. Some prescription and non-prescription medicines should not be taken together. ■

Useful information

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 for your medicine from your pharmacist, Medicines Line or the NPS website (www.nps.org.au/consumers).

Home Medicines Review

A Home Medicines Review (HMR) 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 pharmacist if you want to find out more about HMRs.

Private prescription

Most medicines prescribed by doctors in Australia are covered by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), which subsidises their cost. A private prescription is a prescription

for a medicine that is *not* covered by the PBS. This means that you must pay the full price of the medicine.

NPS Medicines List

The NPS Medicines List is a compact folder in which to list all your current medicines. Carry it in your handbag or wallet, so it is always on hand. Order a Medicines List from the NPS website (www.nps.org.au/consumers).

Medimate

The Medimate brochure gives you information about using medicines wisely and safely. Bilingual versions are also available in Chinese, Greek, Italian and Vietnamese. Order Medimate brochures from the NPS website (www.nps.org.au/consumers).

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).

1. True. However, if you always get your prescriptions from the same pharmacy, they can usually keep a record for you. Any pharmacist can give you a form and explain how the Safety Net works. 2. False. Authority prescriptions cost the same as other PBS prescriptions. 3. True. You can avoid this situation by asking for a generic brand instead. 4. True. Some prescription and non-prescription medicines interact with each other.

Who writes Medicines Talk

MedicinesTalk is written and edited by Ros Wood and Sarah Fogg, and overseen by an Editorial Committee comprising consumer representatives, health professionals and the National Prescribing Service (NPS).

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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

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