

Answering common questions

Guide for peer educators

NOTE: This is **not** a mass handout to seniors but a 'behind the scenes' reference guide to help peer educators:

- answer straightforward questions on generic medicines
- discern which questions should be answered 'talk to your GP or pharmacist'.

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1. Definition, general

- a **What is a generic medicine?** The pharmaceutical company that first develops a medicine takes out a patent to ensure its exclusive right to produce and market it. After the patent expires, other manufacturers can market a medicine with the same active ingredient. These later medicines are called generic medicines.
- Related terms people may have heard of are brand substitution, or chemists own brand.
- b **What is the active ingredient?** The active ingredient is the chemical in the medicine responsible for its therapeutic effect—in other words, the thing that makes the medicine work. For instance, the chemical that lowers blood pressure is the active ingredient in a medicine to treat high blood pressure.
- c **Who makes generic medicines?** Sometimes the company that made the original medicine makes a generic version of their own brand. Sometimes generic medicines are made by another company.
- d **Why is the government encouraging generic medicines?** Government policy is to encourage manufacturers to make generic medicines available where possible, which may reduce costs for the individual and for government
- Many widely used prescription medicines have just come off or are about to come off their patent. (For instance, some medicines for lowering cholesterol levels.)
- e **Is a generic medicine the same as the brand medicine?** Generic medicines contain the same active ingredient as the original brand of medicine, but may be a different colour or have different fillers, packages or be in a different formulation (i.e. a capsule or a tablet.)
- Generic medicines have to be tested to prove that they have the same active ingredient in the same amount. Because they have the same active ingredient, they work in the same way as the original brand (i.e. they have the same effect on the body — this is known as 'bioequivalence'). So generic medicines are just as effective.
- Generic medicines have to meet the same manufacturing quality and safety standards as the original brand. Australian quality and safety standards are high.
- People taking some medicines (e.g. warfarin) would stay on the original brand of medicine that was prescribed for them (which may have been a brand or generic medicine) for clinical reasons.

2. Safety and effectiveness

- a **Are generic medicines as effective as the original brand of medicine?** Yes. Generic medicines have to be tested to prove that they have the same active ingredient. Because they have the same active ingredient, they work in the same way as the original brand (i.e. they have the same effect on the body — this is known as 'bioequivalence'). So generic medicines are just as effective.

- b **Must generic medicines comply with the same quality and safety standards as brands?** Generic medicines have to be tested to prove that they have the same active ingredient. Because they have the same active ingredient, they work in the same way as the original brand. So they are just as effective.
Generic medicines have to meet the same manufacturing quality and safety standards as the original brand. Australian quality and safety standards are high.
- c **Are generic medicines safe to use?** Generic medicines have to meet the same manufacturing quality and safety standards as the original brand. Australian quality and safety standards are high.

3. Cost

- a **Is it just to save money?** Government policy on generic medicines may reduce costs for the individual and for government. As generic medicines are as safe and effective as the original brand medicine, the use of generic medicines can benefit the community by improving the value for money spent in healthcare. Your doctor may be happy for you to make a choice about using a generic medicine. Speak to your doctor about generic medicines.
- b **Why is the cost of a generic medicine different?** Under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, the Australian Government pays the same amount for medicines that provide the same health outcomes. Most medicines (in both brand and generic version) will cost the same. However, a pharmaceutical company may set a higher price for their brand than the subsidy provided by the government. In such cases, the difference between the subsidy and the price set by the company is passed on to the consumer as a brand premium.
A pharmaceutical company can only impose a premium on their product when there is at least one equivalent brand of the drug available without a premium. Brand premiums range from \$0.06 to \$79.48, with an average of \$2.94. (*NPS News* 2006)
- c **Is a generic medicine always cheaper?** No. If the original brand medicine has a brand premium, it will cost more than a generic medicine.

4. Choice

- a **Why would I want to use a generic medicine?** It may cost less than a brand medicine — ask your doctor or pharmacist.
- b **Why would I not want to use a generic medicine?** If you have been on one brand of medicine, you may find changing to another brand affects your medicine routine.
If you have exceptional sensitivity or are allergic to preservatives you may need to check with your doctor or pharmacist about any medicine changes. (For instance, eye drops contain preservatives which could cause problems for some people with sensitivity.)
People taking some medicines (e.g. warfarin) would stay on the original medicine that was prescribed for them (which may have been a brand or a generic medicine) for clinical reasons.
- c **Why does my doctor name a specific brand?** Your doctor may want you to take one particular brand, or to stay on a particular brand once you have started it to avoid confusion. Ask your doctor.

- d **Am I able to make a choice about using a generic medicine?** Your doctor may be happy for you to make a choice about using a generic medicine. Speak to your doctor about generic medicines.
- e **What are the differences and similarities between a generic medicine and the brand medicine?** Generic medicines contain the same active ingredient as the original brand of medicine, but they may be a different colour, size or shape or have different fillers, packages or be in a different formulation (i.e. a capsule or a tablet.)
Generic medicines have to meet the same manufacturing quality and safety standards as the original brand. Australian quality and safety standards are high.
- f **Who is most likely to be offered a generic medicine?** People who take medicines for which there are more generic medicines are available.
People with heart disease, cholesterol problems, depression or people who need antibiotics.

5. Other ingredients in the medicine

- a **Why might a medicine have a different appearance?** Different brands of medicines may be different sizes, shapes, or forms of medicines and have different packaging. A medicine can contain the same active ingredient in the same amount, even though it looks different.
- b **What are binders and fillers? Where can I find the binders and fillers for my medicine?** Binders and fillers are the inert or inactive ingredients that hold the medicine together and make it easier to take. (Pharmacists or doctors may call these excipient ingredients.)
See CMI for list of binders and fillers in tablets and capsules.
- c **Why would someone have an adverse reaction to the generic and not the brand?** People may attribute a symptom to a change of medicine. However, it could be part of the illness or due to something else. Always check with a health professional if you think you have had a reaction to a medicine.
Adverse reactions to binders or fillers are extremely rare.
Binders and fillers are the inert or inactive ingredients that hold the medicine together and make it easier to take.
People who have exceptional sensitivity to, or are allergic to preservatives should check with their doctor or pharmacist about any medicine changes. (For instance, eye drops have preservatives which may cause sensitivity in some people.)
- d **Why are there generic versions of some medicines and not of others?** An original brand medicine could still be under patent or it's not commercially viable for another pharmaceutical company to manufacture it (i.e. because it has low sales).
Many widely used medicines have just come off or are about to come off their patent, which opens up the possibility for pharmaceutical companies to consider producing a generic version. (For instance, medicines for cholesterol control.)
- e **How many binders and fillers are approved for Australian prescription medicines?** 91 binders and fillers are approved for Australian prescription medicines.