

MedicinesTalk

Information for consumers and consumer groups about using medicines wisely

Autumn 2007
No. 21

Getting to know
generic medicines 4

Communication:
It takes two 5

Do I have to go
off the grog? 6

Quick
quiz 7

Useful
information 8

Generic medicines explained

When a pharmaceutical company first develops a new medicine, it takes out a patent to ensure that no other company may make and sell the medicine. It is only after the patent has expired that other companies may make copies of it. These copies are known as generic medicines.

Generic medicines are now more widely available than previously, because the patents of many medicines have expired recently.

Same active ingredient, different brand names

Prescription medicines have two names. The first is the name of the active ingredient. The second is the brand name. The active ingredient is the chemical that makes the medicine work as intended.

When a company produces a new medicine, it gives the active ingredient a name. It also gives the medicine a brand name, which is the name the company uses when promoting and selling the medicine.

When a company produces a generic version of a medicine, it gives the generic version a different brand name. However, the medicine always



contains the same active ingredient as the original medicine.

For example, simvastatin is the active ingredient of a commonly used cholesterol-lowering medicine that was first sold under the brand name of Zocor, and is now available under many other brand names, including Lipex, Simvar 10, Simvastatin-DP, Terry White Simvastatin and Zimstat.

Different inactive ingredients

Medicines also contain inactive ingredients. For example, these ingredients hold tablets together, [cont >](#)



and give capsules a smooth coating so they are easier to swallow. In many cases, generic versions have different inactive ingredients from the original brand.

The different inactive ingredients have no effect on how the medicine works, so most people do not need to worry about them. They are only significant for people with extreme sensitivities or allergies to particular substances, such as gluten, lactose or preservatives, and people who avoid certain substances, such as pork, for personal, cultural or religious reasons. These people should check the inactive ingredients as they would any other medicine.

If your current medicine has a brand premium, using a generic version will save you money.

Different inactive ingredients mean that the different brands often look different. For example, they may be a different colour, size and shape.

Same health benefits, safety and effectiveness

Before being approved, the manufacturer of a generic medicine must show that the medicine has the same amount of active ingredient as the original medicine. The company must also show that the medicine is manufactured using the same stringent quality and safety standards that apply to all medicines made in Australia. These requirements ensure that generic medicines always have the same health benefits, effectiveness and safety as the original medicine.



Generics may be cheaper

In Australia, most prescription medicines are subsidised and made available to consumers through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS). The Government sets a standard price for each medicine on the PBS. For patients with a concession card, the standard price is \$4.90. For other patients, the standard price varies up to a maximum of \$30.70, depending on the medicine.

For most medicines, the original brand and the generic versions are the same price. However, sometimes, a company will charge a higher price than the standard price for its brand. If so, the consumer pays the difference between the standard price and the company price, and the difference is known as the brand premium. The average brand premium is about \$3, but it may range from less than \$1 to almost \$80.

If your current medicine has a brand premium, using a generic version will save you money. There will always be at least one generic version of the medicine available at the standard price. The savings are most noticeable if you pay the concession rate for prescription medicines. For example, a brand premium of \$4.00 nearly doubles the price paid by concession card holders from \$4.90 to \$8.90.

Knowing if your current medicine has a brand premium is easy if you have a concession card, because you will be charged more than the standard \$4.90. If you do not have a concession card, it may be harder. The easiest way to find out if the price of your medicine includes a brand premium is to ask your pharmacist. [cont >](#)

Finding the name of the active ingredient on the pharmacy label

Original brand name	Same active ingredient	Generic brand name	
30 ZOCOR TABLETS 10mg [Simvastatin]	\$5.58	30 ZIMSTAT TABLETS 10mg [Simvastatin]	
Take ONE tablet with a glass of water ONCE a day.		Take ONE tablet with a glass of water ONCE a day.	
Mr A Confos		Mr A Confos	
Dr D Thorpe 20/02/2007	Full cost \$35.57	Dr D Thorpe 20/02/2007	Full cost \$34.89
KEEP OUT OF REACH OF CHILDREN		KEEP OUT OF REACH OF CHILDREN	
QUM PHARMACY, 84 Blane St, Sydney 2000 Tel 02 9515 6333		QUM PHARMACY, 84 Blane St, Sydney 2000 Tel 02 9515 6333	

This diagram shows the pharmacy labels of two brands of the cholesterol-lowering medicine simvastatin. The left-hand one is the original brand Zocor, and the right-hand one is one of the generic versions with the brand name Zimstat. In this example, the patient Mr Confos is a concession card holder. He pays \$5.58 for the original brand Zocor, including a brand premium of \$0.68, or \$4.90 for the generic brand Zimstat.

Changing brands

If you want to take advantage of cheaper generics, talk to your doctor or pharmacist about using a cheaper brand.

It is best to avoid changing brands too often because it can be confusing and can cause medicine mishaps. A typical mishap is taking two brands of the same medicine at the same time and hence taking a double dose. Once you have decided which brand you want to use, ask your pharmacist to give you that brand each time.

Getting to know your medicines will help avoid medicine mishaps. Learn to identify each of your medicines by its active ingredient. If your medicines are changed, look for the name of the active ingredient on each label to make sure that you are not taking two medicines with the same active ingredient.

Also, make sure you understand what each of your medicines is for, and

which medicine the generic version replaces. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask your doctor or pharmacist.

Finding the name of the active ingredient

On the container

The most obvious name on the medicine's container and packaging will usually be the brand name. It will usually be in a larger and bolder print than any other writing on the packaging. The active ingredient will usually appear below the brand name in a smaller and lighter print.

On the pharmacy label

On the pharmacy label, the brand name usually appears first with the active ingredient below, as in the examples above. However, it is becoming increasingly common for the active ingredient to appear first and the brand name below. The order depends on your pharmacy. ■

Getting to know generic medicines



Although 91% of people are aware of generic medicines, many people are confused about them. For example, some people are concerned that they may not be of the same quality as brand medicines.

The Council on the Ageing (COTA), in partnership with the National Prescribing Service, has developed a learning module called 'Brand name or generic medicine: Choosing wisely'. The module will form the basis of interactive education sessions about generic medicines that the State and Territory COTAs will hold around the country for seniors and seniors' groups from March 2007.

The module has been developed in consultation with seniors to make sure it covers the common questions about generic medicines and is easy to understand.

On 5–6 February, representatives from each COTA met in Sydney to familiarise themselves with the new generics module, so they can pass on the knowledge to others in their state or territory.

During the workshop, we asked participants about the education sessions on generic medicines. Here's what they had to say:

'The session where we do a comparison of medicine packets is really useful. A lot of people really haven't stopped to read their medicine packet properly, and they don't realise how much information there is on it. Reading the information on the packet helps people to make informed choices about using generics.'

Karen, State Coordinator, Vic

'The issue around home brand products versus brand name products is misunderstood among consumers. We're not talking about an inferior product: they're all tested. It's a challenge to reassure people about this.'

Christine, Program Coordinator, Vic

'Hospital discharge is still a challenge. There are instances where patients are being discharged and their carer or loved one is giving them the generic medication they were given when discharged, as well as the brand name medication they were taking previously, not realising that they are the same medicine. This means the patient is getting a double dose. Very dangerous!'

Michelle, Program Coordinator, SA

If you would like to attend or organise an information session about generic medicines in your area, telephone the COTA Coordinator in your state or territory. ■

State	Coordinator	Telephone
ACT	Catherine	02 6282 3777
NSW	Michelle	02 8219 4231
NT	Maggie	08 8941 1004
Qld	Diana	07 3316 2999
SA	Germaine	08 8232 0422
Tas	Jane	03 6228 1897
Vic	Karen	03 9655 2107
WA	Jane	08 9321 2133

Communication: It takes two to tango

Communication between you and your health professional is vital if you are to have practical information about what your medicine is for, how and when to take it, and what side effects to watch out for.

However, good communication is about much more than this. Understanding your illness and treatment possibilities gives you the knowledge you need to make decisions about your health, and feel comfortable about doing so. It can also help you feel more confident about being able to cope with and manage your illness and treatment.

Two-way street

Good communication is a two-way street, and you have a crucial role to play. Honestly telling your health professional about your condition, and the effects of any treatments gives them a more complete picture of you and your condition.

When deciding on treatments, your choice may be influenced by how much the condition affects your life, how much the treatment will cost, the effect the treatment will have on your family, how much time you will need off work, and what you have read in the paper or on the Internet. All these considerations are legitimate, and you need to tell your health professional about them, so they can take them into account.

Asking questions when you don't fully understand or need more information is not disrespectful. Rather, it is essential if you are to make good decisions and avoid mistakes and misunderstandings.

Preferences for involvement

Some people want to be more involved in making decisions about their health than others. Whatever your preference, you have a right to receive enough information to understand your illness and your treatment options to the extent that you desire and in a way that you understand.

For more information about communicating with health professionals, obtain or read the National Health and Medical Research Council's 2006 booklet *Making Decisions about Tests and Treatments*. Ring 02 6269 1000 or email nmm@nationalmailing.com.au, or visit www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications. ■



Tips for getting the most out of a visit to your health professional

- Think about the questions you want to ask and things you want to say before your visit.
- Ask for an interpreter if necessary.
- Consider taking someone with you to be your second set of ears or advocate.
- Ask your health professional to repeat any information that you missed or did not understand.
- Ask your health professional to write down any important information or instructions.
- Ask your health professional to tell you where you can find more information.
- Tell your health professional if you need time to think or discuss something with family members.

Do I have to go off the grog?

Some medicines interact with alcohol. In general, women and older people are more likely to experience such interactions, because they are more susceptible to the effects of alcohol.

For most medicines that interact with alcohol, you don't have to avoid alcohol completely.

It takes at least several hours for alcohol to be removed from the body. Therefore, interactions don't occur only when you consume medicines and alcohol at the same time. Rather, they can occur at any time that you have a significant amount of alcohol in your body.

For most medicines that interact with alcohol, you don't have to avoid alcohol completely. Rather, you need to listen to the advice of your doctor or pharmacist and limit your alcohol intake accordingly.

Sleeping, anti-anxiety and anti-depression medicines

Alcohol can increase the effects of medicines that relax or sedate the body, such as sleeping tablets, anti-anxiety medicines and anti-depressant medicines. The increased drowsiness and dizziness may make it harder for you to think clearly, and affect your physical coordination. This, in turn, may make you more prone to falling



and impair your ability to do things like driving a car.

Cough, cold, allergy and travel sickness medicines

Many cold, cough, allergy and travel sickness medicines bought from pharmacies contain ingredients that relax or sedate the body. These ingredients may interact with alcohol to cause increased drowsiness and dizziness.

Painkillers

Some common painkillers, such as aspirin (Disprin), celecoxib (Celebrex), ibuprofen (Nurofen) and naproxen (Naprosyn), can interact with alcohol to cause stomach upsets, stomach bleeding and ulcers.

[cont >](#)

In general, the occasional drink or two is unlikely to cause problems, but regular, heavy drinking may increase your risk of stomach problems.

If you are unsure about drinking alcohol while taking a medicine, ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice.

Opioid painkillers, such as morphine (MS Contin) and oxycodone (Oxycontin), can cause drowsiness, and may interact with alcohol to cause increased drowsiness and greater sensitivity to alcohol.

Preventing problems

If you are unsure about drinking alcohol while taking a medicine, ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice, or read the Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflet for the medicine (see back page).

Check the label. Prescription medicines that interact with alcohol usually have an extra sticker on the label. The sticker will warn you of the possibility of an interaction and tell you what to do if affected, or it will tell you to avoid alcohol completely. Medicines bought from a pharmacy should have a warning on the packaging and label.

Take care. Remember, it may take less alcohol than usual to affect your ability to drive safely. ■

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. Generic medicines contain the same amount of active ingredient as the original brand medicine.
2. You have to pay extra for some PBS medicines.
3. Alcohol increases the effects of all medicines.
4. Doctors don't like people asking questions.

Answers on page 8.

Want to share your story with others?

Do you have a medicines story you would like to share with others, or do you have some suggestions for topics you would like covered in future editions of *MedicinesTalk*?

The *MedicinesTalk* editors welcome your stories, ideas and suggestions for future topics, and feedback about this or previous issues.

Write to us at
MedicinesTalk
GPO Box 1995
Hobart TAS 7001
or
email us at
MedicinesTalk@iinet.net.au



Useful information

CMI leaflets

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).

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 (mobile calls may cost more). The service is open 9 am–6 pm Monday–Friday (EST).

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.

Medication organisers

Medication organisers are plastic boxes that help you remember which medicines to take and when to take them. Some, you fill yourself once a day or once a week. Others, called blister packs (eg Webster-pak), are filled by the pharmacist. To find out more, ask your pharmacist.

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 a Medimate brochure from the NPS website (www.nps.org.au/consumers).

Quiz answers: 1. True. 2. False. Some medicines do cost more, but there will always be a generic version of the medicine available at the standard price (\$4.90 concession price). 3. True for some medicines, but not all medicines. Check the label, CMI leaflet or ask your pharmacist. 4. False. Asking questions lets your doctor know what is important to you and whether you have understood what has been discussed.

Who writes MedicinesTalk

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).

MedicinesTalk is sponsored and published by NPS, an independent non-profit organisation for the Quality Use of Medicines (QUM) funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

ISSN: 1447-3208 (print) and 14447-3216 (online)

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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