

Generic Drugs

Generic drugs can save you money. They cost much less than brand-name drugs. But many people worry that generics are not as good. You need not fear that. Generics are every bit as pure, potent, and safe as brands. They aren't like "generic" cereal, soap, or canned goods — where the brand is indeed usually a better product. The Food and Drug Administration regulates generic drugs just as it does brands, and all generics, by law, must have exactly the same active chemicals as the brands they copy. You'll get the same medical benefit.

It's tempting to want the newest medicine. But you may not need one. Think of generics as "tried and true." They have been prescribed for many years, and doctors know them well. In contrast, new drugs have uncertainties and can sometimes cause problems. Today, generics are available for about half of all prescription drugs, and some widely prescribed drugs will become available as generics in the next few years. So, ask your doctor or pharmacist if you can save money by using a generic drug.

THE BASICS

Generics are copies of brand-name medicines whose patents have expired. That usually happens after a brand drug has been on the market for about 10 to 14 years. By law, the brand name company loses the right to be the only seller of that drug after its patent period is up. But it can be quite confusing when new generics become available.

The first reason for that confusion is that most of the time the brand-name drug stays on the market. So if you have been taking one for many years for a chronic disease, you and your doctor will have a choice: You can stick with the brand or switch to the generic.

Not surprisingly, you may be reluctant to switch at first because change isn't easy if something is working. That's one reason many generics remain under-prescribed compared to brands. But these days, your insurer, pharma-

cist, and doctor may be newly committed to making the switch. *Our advice:* there's no reason not to.

The second reason generics can be confusing is that generic pills often look different. The companies that make brand-name drugs have been very successful at selling you their

pills in certain colors, shapes, and sizes. For example, you may recall the ads for the "purple pill" (for heart-burn). Brand pills may also have a colored outer shell that contains a sweetener. Generics, in contrast, are often plain white pills that don't look as high quality. *Our advice:* don't be fooled by appearances. The shape, color, and taste of a pill make no biological or medical difference.

The third reason for confusion is that many doctors may continue to write a prescription for the brand medicine and leave it to the pharmacist to ask you whether you would prefer that or the generic. In every state, the pharmacist can make this switch without the doctor's permission, but they must ask you first. The problem: when you get asked this question for the first time or for a new prescription, you may be reluctant. *Our advice:* talk it over with the pharmacist and take the generic.

A DRUG BY ANY OTHER NAME...

Drug names are confusing! Most drugs have two names, a generic name and a brand name. The generic name is usually long and hard to pronounce. The brand name is chosen by the drug's manufacturer, primarily for marketing purposes. For example, Viagra implies vigor.

It's much easier to remember the brand names of most drugs. Indeed, some of them become "household names." These days that's largely because the drugs are advertised in magazines and on TV.

Hard as it may be, it's a good idea to also become familiar with the generic name of the drugs you take. That way, you'll be better prepared when the generic does become available. And you might find it easier to get information on the drug from reference books or the Internet.

POSSIBLE GENERIC SWITCHES – PRICE COMPARISON

Condition or Disease	Brand-Name Drug	Cost Per Month ¹	Possible Generic Substitute	Cost Per Month ¹
High Blood Pressure	Coreg 12.5mg (<i>carvediol</i>)	\$128	Propranolol 20mg or 40mg	\$13 – \$15
High Cholesterol ²	Vytorin 10mg/10mg (<i>ezetimibe/simvastatin</i>)	\$95	Lovastatin 20mg	\$37
Depression	Zoloft 25mg (<i>sertraline</i>)	\$103	Fluoxetine 20mg	\$37
Arthritis and Pain	Celebrex 100mg (<i>celecoxib</i>)	\$135	Ibuprofen 600mg	\$30
Heartburn	Nexium (<i>esomeprazole</i>)	\$179	Prilosec OTC ³	\$12 – \$24

(1) Recent prices from *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs* reports (www.CRBestBuyDrugs.org). Derived from data provided by Wolters Kluwer Health, Pharmaceutical Audit Suite. (2) For people who require LDL cholesterol reduction of less than 30%. (3) This is a nonprescription, over-the-counter drug.

Other doctors may switch to writing the prescription for the generic without fully explaining this to you.

Our recommendation is to talk with your doctor about your prescription *when it is being written in his or her office*. Inquire whether the prescription is for a brand or generic, and learn why your doctor has prescribed one or the other.

The fourth reason generics can be confusing is that most of us have health insurance that covers much of the cost of our medicines. Why bother with the generic if the brand is not going to cost you that much more?

Well, for one, the generic will cost you less, so why not. For example, these days you may have to pay \$7 to \$10 for the generic versus \$15 to \$35 for the brand-name drug. If you take several medicines, the difference can mount. Also, by switching, you'll be helping to keep a lid on soaring health care costs and insurance premiums. Remember, on average, the price for the generic will be one-third

the price of the brand. So, the savings for everyone is substantial.

SWITCHING DRUGS

Until now, we have been talking mostly about switching to the generic version of a brand drug when it becomes available. But there's another way you can and should be taking advantage of generics. If you are taking a costly brand-name drug for a chronic illness, a generic of *another drug in the same class* may be available that would work just as well and cost less. Yes,

your doctor may have prescribed the brand. And if he or she wants you to stay on it, you should. But many doctors prescribe newer medicines because those are the ones that get promoted.

We advise that you talk with your doctor about whether another less expensive medicine – a generic or cheaper brand – is available that would do just as good a job. In many classes of drugs these days, doctors and researchers are learning that the older medicines (now generics) work just as well as the new ones.

Bear in mind that pharmacists can not switch you to a generic of another drug without your doctor's permission. However, more and more pharmacists today are working with insurers, employers, doctors and patients to make these switches when they are appropriate.

If you lack insurance coverage for drugs, you have a special incentive to work with your doctor to choose the most affordable medicines. Switching to a generic may mean that you can pay for the drugs you need without financial hardship or strain.

Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs can help guide you to lower cost generic drugs. Visit our Web site at www.CRBestBuyDrugs.org.

THE SHOPPER'S GUIDE TO PRESCRIPTION DRUGS SERIES

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