

Generic Drugs: Your Questions Answered

There is a common misperception that generic drugs don't work as well because they are cheaper.

The facts are:

- Generic drugs sold in Canada are designed to work the same way in the body as the original brand name drug.
- Generic drugs cost less because much of the expensive research has already been done.
- Generic drugs save money that can be spent on other needs.

What is a brand name drug?

- It is the first version of a drug to be sold within a country.
- It is sold by the "innovator manufacturer"; in other words, the company that first researched and developed the drug.

What is a generic drug?

- It is a copy of a brand name drug.

How are generic and brand name drugs the same?

- They have the same active ingredient (the chemical that makes the drug work).
- They have the same amount of the active ingredient.
- They work the same way in the body.

How are generic and brand name drugs different?

- They may have different inactive ingredients (such as flavours or preservatives).
- They may have slightly different colours, shapes, or markings.
- Generic drugs cost less.

Why do generic drugs cost less than brand name drugs?

A company must spend many years studying a new brand name drug before it can be approved for sale in Canada. The company then holds a patent on the drug, so no other company is allowed to sell it. This allows the first company to earn back the money it spent on research.

When the patent expires, other companies are allowed to make copies of the drug. These generic drug companies don't have to spend as much money studying the medication. That lowers the price.

There is usually competition between the generic drug companies. That also makes the price lower.

How do I know if a generic drug is safe?

Health Canada reviews and approves all drugs before they can be sold in Canada. For generic drugs, studies must show that the generic drug is designed to work the same way in the body as the original brand name drug.

Health Canada also has rules about how all drugs are manufactured. All companies selling drugs in Canada must follow the same rules for the manufacturing process and for ensuring the quality of their ingredients.

When might it be unsafe to switch brands?

Rarely, someone might be allergic to an inactive ingredient in a drug. If you are allergic to ingredients such as lactose, gluten, sulfites, or tartrazine, check with your pharmacist before you take any drug (both brand name and generic) for the first time.

Why do drugs have two names?

It doesn't matter if your drug is a brand name version or a generic version, it will always have two names: a trade name and a generic name. The trade name is chosen by the company selling the drug. The generic name is the name of the active ingredient, and this active ingredient is always the same, no matter which version of the drug you take.

Sometimes trade names can be confusing. It's a little like brands of facial tissue. You may buy Kleenex, Scotties, or Royale, but they are all facial tissue. Kleenex is a popular brand, and there are some people who always say "Kleenex" when they really mean "facial tissue".

This can be a problem with drugs. If you know one drug as "Kleenex" and one drug as "facial tissue," you might accidentally take the same drug twice.

Know the generic names for all of your drugs. You'll be able to communicate clearly with different health professionals who may use different names for the drugs, and you can be sure you are getting the right medication, no matter which version you take.

What is a biologic drug?

It is a drug that is made using human or animal tissue or micro-organisms as a starting material. Copies of biologic drugs are called subsequent entry biologics (SEBs). SEBs are not exact copies of the original and are not considered generic drugs. As such, the information in this document does not apply to biologic drugs.

Where can I find more information?

Health Canada's web page on The Safety and Effectiveness of Generic Drugs is available at:

<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/med/med-gen-eng.php>.

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