

Taking generic medicines

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A generic medicine is identical to a brand name or 'originator' medicine in composition and strength of its active ingredient(s), dosage form, route of administration, quality, performance characteristics and intended use or indications.

Although generic medicines are chemically identical to the originator medicines, they are typically sold at substantially reduced prices, largely because the costly research and development that goes into bringing new chemical entities to market has already been conducted by the innovator company. Using generic medicines is one way to reduce the costs of health care, without compromising on the quality of the health care.

The Medicines Control Council (MCC) registers medicines on the basis of their quality, safety and efficacy in terms of the current guidelines, standards and policies. The MCC requires generic medicines to have the same high quality, strength, purity and stability as originator medicines. It can then be said that the two medicines are 'bioequivalent'.

Not every originator medicine has a generic medicine available for it. This is because, when new medicines are developed, they have patent protection, usually for 20 years, after the medicine was first discovered. The patent protects the investment in the medicine's development by giving the innovator company the sole right to sell the medicine while the patent remains in effect. When the patent expires, other

pharmaceutical manufacturers can start selling a generic version of the medicine.

In South Africa, a pharmacist filling a prescription is required to inform the patient about the availability of a generic medicine and about the benefits of substituting the originator medicine with a generic equivalent. The pharmacist is then required to substitute the originator medicine with a generic equivalent unless expressly forbidden by the patient to do so.

However, the pharmacist shall not sell a generic medicine if the prescriber has written in his or her own hand on the prescription the words 'no substitution' next to the item prescribed. Furthermore, the pharmacist shall not sell a generic medicine if the price of the generic medicine is higher than that of the prescribed medicine. Finally, generic substitution is not permitted for certain classes of medicines, such as those products that cannot be identical to the originator due to certain differences in formulations as these factors can affect how the medicine works in the body.

Do

- Ask about the availability of generic medicines when having prescriptions filled and when purchasing over-the-counter medicines.
- Ask about the benefits of generic substitution, especially if taking long-term or 'chronic' medicines.

Don't

- Change the medicine prescribed by the doctor to a different medicine if there is no generic available for the prescribed medicine without speaking to the doctor first.

Refer to the doctor

- If any difference in the effect of the medicine is noticed.
- If any side-effects are noticed.