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## What to do if your medication isn't available

If you take medication then you're no stranger to regularly picking up a prescription – but what happens when your medication isn't available? There are many reasons why medication may become unavailable and it's important you know what to do if this happens to your prescription.

The most important thing to remember is that you must speak with your GP or pharmacist about alternatives if you cannot get your regular medication. Hussain Abdeh, superintendent pharmacist at [Medicine Direct](#), and Scott McDougall, co-founder of [The Independent Pharmacy](#), explain more.

"High demand may account for why certain medicines are unavailable, especially if it is a medicine to treat a very common condition," Abdeh says. "Buying patterns of certain medicines can also spike at certain times of the year, causing stock issues along the way."

He explains that local shortages can also be experienced at pharmacies, so it's always a good idea to check if your medication is available at another pharmacy.

### Don't stop taking your meds

It's important you continue taking your prescribed medication, so if you cannot get your usual prescription you will need to find alternatives. Your GP or pharmacist will be able to help with that.

"Most medicines will be available in more than one version, such as a different brand or a generic version of what you require. If the required medication is not available, one of these alternatives will normally be dispensed by the pharmacy," Abdeh says.

"In cases where an alternative form of the same medicine is not available, a different medicine with similar properties will be recommended.

"This alternative will be a treatment for the same condition and a qualified medical professional will check to make sure that it is safe for you to take."

## Pharmacist or GP?

Who you contact about your missing medication depends on the type of medication you usually take. If it's a prescription, your GP or practice nurse will need to issue you with a new prescription, but if it's over-the-counter medication then your pharmacist is your best bet.

"If it is a prescription medication, by law, the pharmacist has to provide the medicine that the doctor has stipulated," McDougall explains.

"For non-prescription medicines, pharmacists are able to advise on similar alternatives. There are multiple medicines and brands available, so if your preferred medication is not available, the pharmacist could suggest multiple alternatives that might help instead."

Abdeh adds that pharmacists often stock a 'like for like' version of medications, so if your version isn't available another version could be provided.

"In the instance where there is not a like-for-like alternative, the pharmacist may need to request an alternative prescription from your doctor," he adds.

"Firstly, they will need to authorise a new prescription for you to change prescription medicines. Secondly, they will have access to your medical history and will be able to make certain that the new medication is safe for you to take. However in most cases the pharmacist is able to dispense a similar medicine to treat your condition.

"You should never change from one prescription medicine to another without speaking with your GP. Different medicines contain different ingredients, even if they are used to treat the same condition, so one medicine may be less effective than another for different people."

## Danger zone

It goes without saying that stopping medication can put your health at serious risk, so it's very important you find an alternative to your regular prescription if it's not available.

"To effectively treat or control a condition, it is vital that you always take your medication exactly as your doctor or pharmacist has instructed you," Abdeh says.

For one-off (rather than repeat) medication, he advises: "You should never stop taking a medicine before you finish your course of treatment as laid out by your doctor. Doing this may mean that you have not fully cured the problem, which means that the problem may come back again."

You may also experience unpleasant side effects and withdrawal symptoms if you stop taking medication, Abdeh adds.

Withdrawal symptoms could include:

- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Stomach pain
- Sleep problems
- Sweating

McDougall adds that the risk of stopping your medication depends on the type of prescription you usually take. If you're unsure, pharmacists can advise on this.

## **Generic is just as good**

There's a common misconception that generic versions of a drug aren't as effective, or won't treat your condition as successfully. But actually, generic drugs are just as effective, have no more side effects and are often cheaper for the NHS.

McDougall says you don't have to worry if your pharmacist swaps your usual medication for a generic version. "Generic and branded medicines are all thoroughly tested to ensure that they meet the same standard of quality," he explains. "Even receiving different generic brands is inconsequential, a common pharmaceutical practice that saves the NHS money."

"However, some medicines must be prescribed as a specific brand. For these medications, there are very narrow margins between a safe and a toxic dose, so even small changes can be dramatic.

"Thankfully, there are very few medicines that fall into this category, and pharmacists are aware of this. As a result, they can ensure that patients are kept on the right brand of medication for their condition."

Abdeh adds that you should always tell your doctor or pharmacist about other medications you are taking if your prescription needs to be swapped.

"This includes medicine that you can buy without a prescription, like herbal remedies, vitamins and supplements," he says. "If you know that you are allergic to certain substances, or if you have a medical/family history of any serious health problems, make sure they know straightaway."

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