

Medications and brand names

Most medications have two names – the active ingredient and a brand name. There may also be more than one brand of the same medication.

It can get a little complicated, so here is a simple explanation

Active ingredient – is the name of the chemical that makes the medication work. These are often scientific and difficult to remember.

Brand name – is the name the pharmaceutical company gives the medication, and usually much easier to remember. This is the original brand name.

Generic brand name – is the name given by other pharmaceutical companies once the patent expires and the medication can be developed elsewhere.

Many medicines with the same active ingredient are available under several different brands

Medications for epilepsy

There are many original brand and generic brand medications on the market for epilepsy. Your pharmacist may offer you a different brand of medication when you are getting your prescription filled. While there should be no meaningful difference in preparation and effectiveness, and the active ingredient is still the same, there are some concerns for people with epilepsy who are thinking of switching antiseizure medication brands

What are generic medications?

Apart from a different name, generic brands come in different packaging, the pills can look different, and they are sometimes slightly cheaper. A generic brand has essentially the same active ingredient as the original brand.

Even though specific guidelines and tests are conducted to ensure the generic brand medications are the same, a slight degree of variation is allowed. This means that the generic product is not *exactly* the same as the original brand.

Generic medications are comparable in dose, strength, route of administration, intended use, quality and performance. However, they are still not identical to the original (unless developed by the original company). There are a few key differences:

- The most obvious are the tablets appearance and packaging.
- The inactive ingredients may differ – these include what is used as a filler, binder, coating, flavouring or colouring.
- There are also minor differences in the active ingredient. These are very small because the generic preparation must be similar enough to the original to satisfy strict guidelines. The maximum variability between a generic and original medication is 10%.

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What are generic medications? continued....

- They are sometimes cheaper, which does not mean that they are inferior. It is because manufacturers of the generics do not have to recover the expenses of developing the original medication.

If your doctor ticks the 'Brand substitution not permitted' box on the prescription, the pharmacist will know not to offer you an alternative brand. You can also request your usual brand if you don't want to change.

It is a problem if I switch brands?

Most antiseizure medications have a narrow 'therapeutic range'. This means even a minor change in blood levels of the active ingredient can lead to a change in response, for instance, seizures – or possibly unwanted side effects for the few people taking doses that already border on toxicity.

**Therapeutic range: The concentration of a drug at which the person will experience the desired clinical effect.*

The risks of switching – whether the medication change is from original brand to generic brand, generic brand to original brand or generic to a different generic – include changes in seizure pattern, having "breakthrough" seizures after a long period without seizures, or experiencing new or more unwanted side-effects.

Studies have shown that even small differences in epilepsy medication can trigger seizures in people who have epilepsy.

With most types of medication, switching brands may not make any difference. But with medications for epilepsy, they can make a difference. With antiseizure medications there is a fine line between the medication not working, working well or causing unwanted side-effects. The slightest change in dose can make all the difference and switching brands may change the level of the medication in the blood.

What should I do?

1. Don't switch medication if your epilepsy is well-controlled.
2. Ask the pharmacist offering a generic brand medication about why they advise switching. Be aware it is your choice if you want to switch or not, and feel free to insist on receiving your usual preparation.
3. Know the active ingredient name of your medication. It may help to note it down to carry in your wallet for reference. You could even take the box to the chemist to help you remember.
4. Ask your doctor to tick the 'do not substitute' box on the prescription form so you cannot be offered a different medication by a pharmacist.
5. Remember the consequences of switching antiseizure medications can possibly increase the risk of seizures or breakthrough seizures.
6. Always talk to your neurologist before switching epilepsy medications and do not make this decision at the chemist or based on the pharmacist's advice.
7. Check the packet. Check the packaging and brand name against what you usually use before you leave the chemist. If it doesn't match, ask the pharmacist to change it.



What should I do? continued....

8. Consider the real cost. If your pharmacist suggests that switching to another brand or 'generic' can save you money, consider if the small money saving is worth the cost of perhaps more seizures or adverse side effects. Feel free to politely refuse and insist on your usual medication.

9. Keep good records. Record all the names of your medications on a list can help you, your doctor and your pharmacist keep track of your medications and brands. This can also be helpful if you unexpectedly get admitted to hospital as well.

If the brand works, don't switch!

For more information go to:

[Medicines and Brand Names](#)

[Find out more information about your medication](#)



References:

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NPS Medicine Wise (2020) Accessed May 2020 <https://www.nps.org.au/consumers/medicines-and-brand-names-explained>