

Are Generic Drugs Just as Safe as Brand Name Drugs?



According to Health Canada, nearly 50% of prescriptions filled by pharmacies in Canada are for generic drugs. But are these drugs just as safe as their brand-name competitors? Or are they just a way to save money?

The good news is that generic drugs are just as safe and just as effective as the brand-name version of the same drug. They have the same dosage, strength and quality of brand-name medications. In fact, these generic drugs follow the same manufacturing guidelines as brand-name drugs do.

Generic drug manufacturers must prove:

- The active ingredients in the generic drug are the same as the brand-name version.
- The inactive ingredients are acceptable.
- The strength, route of administration (e.g., oral or topical), use and form (e.g., tablet or injectable) are the same as the brand-name version.
- The drug is manufactured under the same strict federal guidelines as the brand-name version.
- The container the medication is shipped in is appropriate and has the same label as the brand-name version.

In general, all drug manufacturers must make sure generic medicines work exactly the same way as brand-name medicines. They must perform a series of tests at every step of the way to make sure they meet all the requirements of their brand-name competitors. That means inspecting manufacturing plants, measuring active pharmaceutical ingredients (API) and ensuring compliance with all Health Canada regulations.

How are generic drugs different from brand-name drugs?

While the effectiveness and safety of generic drugs are exactly the same as their brand-name version, there are some differences. Probably the most important difference to consumers is the price. Generic drugs are 80% to 85% cheaper than brand-name drugs. Other differences include size, shape, colour and markings.

The biggest chemical difference is in the inactive ingredients found in the generic drug. These ingredients can be derived from food products, fillers and colouring agents. They can also vary within the same brand product, depending on the dosage. They do not, however, affect the therapeutic value of the drug. Only the active ingredients can do that.

How can inactive ingredients affect me?

The inactive ingredients in both generic and brand-name drugs can cause allergic reactions in some people. In most cases, it's not serious. But, with generic drugs, the consistency of those inactive ingredients may be hard to identify.

While all inactive ingredients must be acceptable under Health Canada rules, generic drug manufacturers don't have to use the same inactive ingredients each time. Brand name manufacturers do.

Why are generic drug prices so much lower?

When a prescription drug is first developed, usually only a brand-name version is available. The manufacturer receives a patent on the drug, limiting competition. But, when the patent expires, other companies are free to make and market a generic version of the drug.

These generic drugs often appeal to consumers because of their low price. Manufacturers are able to manage pricing because:

- They don't need to cover the cost of researching and developing the product.
- They don't have to repeat the rigorous testing required to bring the drug to market.
- They don't pay for marketing and advertising.
- Multiple versions of a generic drug may be approved at the same time, creating competition.

For more information on generic drugs and how they are approved, visit the [Access to Generic Drugs in Canada](#) page of Health Canada's website. If you have questions about what your plan covers, talk to your human resources representative or benefits administrator.

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