

Medicine Shortages: A Briefing for CCGs, GPs and other NHS prescribers

Prescribers may be aware of recent media reports about medicines supply issues. This briefing explains some of the issues and the impact they are having.

1. Medicines supply: current situation for pharmacies and patients

- Community pharmacy teams are increasingly reporting that they are struggling to source certain medicines. In some cases availability is an issue; in others, medicines are available but only at significantly inflated prices.
- Pharmacy teams are having to spend a lot of time sourcing medicines, sometimes having to contact up to seven or eight wholesalers to find a medicine. This can lead to delays for patients needing the affected medicines.
- Community pharmacists use a range of measures to ensure patients can access medicines in short supply, including:
 - “Staged” dispensing – this is where pharmacies only give patients some of their medicines and ask them to come back to collect the rest of the prescription later.
 - Liaising with GPs to find alternative medicines that may be suitable for patients.
 - Making many phone calls to different suppliers to try to find the medicines that their patients need.
 - Seeing if stock may be available in other local pharmacies.

2. Medicines supply and pricing

- Supply issues are not a new phenomenon, but there has been a recent surge in the number of generics affected.
- Medicines shortages can be caused by a range of factors, including manufacturing problems. Generics prices in England are also incredibly low compared to most parts of the world, which may make the market less attractive. Uncertainty around Brexit and contingency planning may be another factor currently exacerbating the issues.
- Pharmacies work hard to purchase medicines cost effectively, but shortages often lead to price increases. Where a shortage leads to a significant price increase, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) can grant a ‘price concessions’ recognising this. Price concessions are examined monthly, and in November and December last year we saw an increase in the number of concessions being granted, indicating an increase in supply problems.
- In November 2018, DHSC granted 69 price concessions, and in December this figure rose to 85. You can read more about the concessions system at: <https://psnc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/PSNC-Briefing-067.18-How-the-price-concession-system-operates-1.pdf>
- Medicine supply is a national issue, but there can be regional variation and supply and pricing issues can affect individual pharmacies much more than others. This adds to the ongoing financial pressures on pharmacies.

3. Impact on prescribers

- GPs may increasingly be contacted by pharmacies and asked to consider alternatives if stock is unobtainable.
- Prescriptions for alternative medicines may need to be issued so that patients can receive treatment more quickly.
- Medicine price increases can impact on local prescribing budgets, and CCGs should be aware of this risk.
- Patients should be encouraged to order repeat prescriptions in good time (but no more than seven days before it is due) and only to reorder medicines that they need.
- Prescribers are requested to resist writing prescriptions for longer periods of time as this could exacerbate supply issues.

4. Contingency planning and improvements

- PSNC, the national community pharmacy negotiating body, has asked the Government to help protect pharmacies from the impact of any supply issues, both financially and in terms of the additional workload.
- We would also like to see improvements to the price concessions system so that pharmacies can have clarity about medicines prices and availability, earlier in the month.
- DHSC are working on contingency plans to ensure continuity of the supply of medicines after the UK’s exit from the EU with the support of stakeholders.