Medication Shortages

Why do shortages happen?

Medicines supply issues have become an increasingly common problem. In England, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) is responsible for the continuity of supply of medicines. They work closely with NHS England, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), the wider NHS, pharmaceutical companies, wholesalers and others in the supply chain to ensure consistency in supply of medicines.

Supply issues can occur for a number of reasons, and sometimes a combination of factors, including:

- Manufacturing issues or disruption
- Capacity issues *e.g. staff shortages*
- Commercial withdrawal *e.g. a drug company closes down*
- Sudden changes in the prices of medicines or ingredients
- Drug recalls and quality issues
- Availability of raw ingredients
- Increased demand
- Distribution problems *e.g. fuel shortages*
- Unbalanced movement of stock due to currency fluctuations
- Unexpected national demand
- Stockpiling and panic buying
- Supply quotas *e.g. a limit to how much product is available for purchase*

What are my healthcare team able to do?

Supply issues sometimes result in pharmacies unable to get stock of certain medicines. Supply can be intermittent, unpredictable, or unavailable. Pharmacy and healthcare teams are spending an increasing amount of time trying to get appropriate medicines for their patients. Government bodies are working to address disruptions in the supply of medicines and to put measures in place to manage these issues. We expect changes to be made in 2024.

How does this affect me?

It is understandably stressful when informed one or more of your medicines is unavailable. In most cases, there will be alternative medicines or options to help manage your condition. Occasionally there are limited options available. In these circumstances, national advice is issued by the DHSC and NHS England to inform healthcare professionals how to manage patients affected by the shortage. This ensures all patients are treated fairly and avoids knock on effects to other medicines to allow the supply chain time to fix the problem.

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What can I do?

Community Pharmacy England produced a leaflet for patients in 2022 which gives appropriate advice on only ordering the medicines you need and requesting your prescription in good time: CPE Information on medicines supply for patients. In some situations, you may need to visit more than one pharmacy to find stock for your prescription.

Further information

Managing medication shortages adds pressure to all team members. Processing extra prescriptions, making changes, sourcing supply and the administration involved takes extra time for clerical and clinical teams. Please be considerate and reassured that your healthcare team are doing everything they can to get your medicines to you.