



Drug FAQs for Members

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Generic Medicines: Safe, Effective, Affordable

What is a generic medicine?

A generic medicine is a copy of a brand-name medicine in terms of its dosage, safety, strength and quality. It has the same active ingredients and works the same way in the body. A generic medicine has the same benefits, side-effects, and risks as its brand-name counterpart. Some generic medicines are even made by the same drug company that makes the brand-name product.

How are generic medicines different from the brand-name version?

A generic medicine does not look exactly like its brand-name counterpart due to U.S. trademark laws. The name, color, or flavor of the medicine may be different, but none of these things affect the way the generic medicine works.

One of the biggest differences between generic and brand-name medicines is cost. In 2005, drug companies spent over \$4.2 billion on advertising brand-name products. These costs get passed on to you, the consumer, in the form of higher medicine prices. Generic medicines are often made by more than one drug company, which results in competition. And because generic products are usually not advertised to either doctors or to the public, there are fewer extra costs to pass along to the consumer.

How do I know that generic medicines are safe and effective?

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) tests and approves all medicines sold in the United States to make sure they work well and are safe for consumers. FDA requires that generic medicines meet the same strict standards as their brand-name counterparts. In addition to FDA's review, Kaiser Permanente does its own independent quality review of generic products before accepting them for use.

Is a generic version available for every brand-name medicine?

No. When brand-name medicines are first introduced, they are made by only one company and are protected by drug patents for 17 years. Once the patent expires, other drug companies can then copy the recipe. Before they can start selling the generic version of the medicine, they must first test the medicine to prove that it's the same as the brand-name product. These tests must be reviewed and approved by the FDA.

If the brand-name medicine you take does not currently have a generic counterpart, you can ask your doctor or pharmacist if there's a different medicine that's as safe and effective and available as a generic.

Reference: The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Generic Drugs – Questions and Answers, Oct 2007; www.fda.gov.