

<http://www.psa.org.au/selfcare>

Take a look at the label

If you regularly, or even just occasionally, take medicines, you'll almost certainly be aware that many medicines are available under different brand names. So are all these different brands as good as each other? This question is the focus of the latest *Be Medicinewise* Campaign initiated by the National Prescribing Service (NPS) – the independent, Commonwealth Government-funded organisation established to provide both health professionals and health consumers with information to make better decisions about medicines.

According to NPS Clinical Adviser, Danielle Stowaser, “Switching brands generally has little impact, but for some people it can lead to confusion and subsequent medicine mishaps. It's important people understand their medicine options and are able to make informed decisions for their personal circumstances.”

The reward given to a company or an institution which researches and develops a new medicine is a patent period, during which that company has the exclusive right and opportunity to market the medicine – without competition.

Once this patent period is finished other pharmaceutical companies can manufacture and market the medicine – the same active ingredient under a different brand name.

All medicines sold in Australia must be approved by the Government through the TGA – the Therapeutic Goods Administration. For prescription medicines subsidised by way of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), the TGA requires that an alternative brand of medicine meets the same strict standards of quality, safety and effectiveness as the original brand.

The NPS key message is that most medicines are known by more than one name: the active ingredient name and the brand name (or names); and what matters is the active ingredient. It's the active ingredient which makes the medicine work. So we should know where to find the name of the active ingredient on the label.

Different brands of medicines may look different, but if you are offered an alternative brand by your pharmacist, you can be sure it will work in the same way.

You will only be offered an alternative brand of medicine if it is proven to be so-called bioequivalent to the original brand. Two products are said to be bioequivalent when they produce such similar blood concentrations of the active ingredient that their effects can be considered to be the same.

There are a few instances where an alternative brand may not be an option; even when the patent period of the original brand has expired. Sometimes medicines containing the same active ingredient in the same dose are formulated so that the rate of absorption is different; that is, one medicine may be effective for a shorter or longer time. More or less frequent doses may be necessary for the desired effect.

Very rarely someone might be allergic (or have an adverse reaction) to the what are known as the excipients – the non-active ingredients such as binders, fillers, lubricants, coatings and dyes – substances used to “encase” the active ingredient and deliver it to the patient in an easy to swallow, palatable form. Most manufacturers use the same excipients – the range available is small and all are reviewed by the TGA to ensure they are safe and non-toxic. If you are aware of possible allergies to excipients a list of all ingredients in medicines is given in the Consumer Medicines Information (CMI) available from your pharmacist for all prescription medicines.

However, by far the major consideration when determining whether or not an alternative brand would be appropriate, is the potential for confusion. This possibility of confusion can be overcome by becoming familiar with the name of the active ingredient, not just the brand name.

The NPS website (www.nps.org.au) provides more information about the *Be Medicinewise* Campaign; and your local Self Care pharmacy can advise you on the relative merits of alternative brands. For the nearest location phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1 300 369 772 or log on to the Pharmaceutical Society's website at www.psa.org.au.