

Safe Management of Medicines Stock Shortages

Pharmacy and GP practice teams are having to spend increased time dealing with medicines shortages and this can be frustrating for the patient, pharmacist and prescriber. Failure to manage these correctly can also lead to poor health outcomes for the patient.

At the current time, the continuing impact of COVID-19 is resulting in all sectors of the healthcare system seeing an unprecedented workload and so it is imperative that all sectors recognise the challenges we face together.

The list of medicines that patients receive which do not have an easily substituted alternatives is long. However, **all possibilities should be explored** before a change to the prescription is requested.

Examples include, but are not limited to, antipsychotics, DMARDs, anti-hypertensives, anti-glycaemics etc. Patients have frequently been stabilised on these medicines over a period of time and so switching will involve both considerable work and also multiple contacts with patients who may be self-isolating or unable to attend regular GP appointments.

In order to reduce the impact of these stock shortages we ask that pharmacies and surgeries to work together to bring about a satisfactory solution.

- Find out how urgently the patient requires the medication. Shortages may be temporary and if a patient has sufficient stock at home, the product may become available before there is a genuine need.
- Obtain sufficient information from all suppliers. Do alternative suppliers have products in stock? When is the stock likely to be available?
- Find out if there is an easy solution. Is a branded product or alternative brand available? Are different strengths of the product available that could be doubled-up, cut in half (if appropriate), or taken more or less frequently? Is a different suitable formulation of the medicine, such as a liquid available as a temporary measure?
- Do other pharmacies have stock available? This includes pharmacies from other companies, who may use different wholesalers and who may be able to order the item.
- If the item is likely to be out of stock for some time, there may be a [Serious Shortage Protocol](#) (SSP) in place. These are issued by the government and allow pharmacists to provide patients with an alternative product or quantity to their original prescribed treatment without the need to refer back to the prescriber.

You can check for the latest SSPs at:

- <https://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/pharmacies-gp-practices-and-appliance-contractors/serious-shortage-protocols-ssps>
- <https://psnc.org.uk/dispensing-supply/supply-chain/live-ssps/>
- Speak to the prescriber directly, and where possible have suggestions for alternatives which are in stock or available. It is not acceptable to send messages with patients who will not have a full understanding of the situation and be unable to answer questions.
- For longer term shortages, consider undertaking a PMR search to proactively identify other patients who the stock shortage issue may affect and share this with the GP practice, along with suggested solutions.

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Identify Urgency

- Does the patient need this now or do they have stock at home?
- Will it be back in stock before the patient has run out?
- What are the clinical consequences of any delay?

Supplier Information

- Do alternative suppliers have stock available?
- When is stock likely to be available?

Initial Options

- Is a branded product or alternative brand available?
- Could different strengths be doubled up or halved?
- Is an appropriate different formulation available (e.g. liquid) as a temporary measure?

Other Pharmacies

- Do other pharmacies have stock available? This could be transferred or the patient could take their prescription to them on this occasion.
- Can they order the stock? Different pharmacies may have different suppliers who may have the item in stock.

Serious Shortage Protocols

- Is an SSP in place for the item? (You can check [here](#)). This may allow you to make appropriate substitutions or supply a different quantity to that prescribed.

Speak to the Prescriber

- Talk to the prescriber, and have suggestions for alternatives (which are in stock or available) ready. **Do not send messages with patients.**
- For longer term stock issues, identify other patients who may be affected