Dear Alice,

I've been using name brand birth control pills for eight years and now my insurance company will only cover generic birth control pills. Do you know anything about the pros and cons of using generic pills as opposed to name brand pills? Are they as effective?

Thanks,
Confused

Answer

Dear Confused,

What's in a name? A brand-name drug and its generic counterpart are chemically the same. They may have different names, colors, and shapes, but the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires generic drugs to share several similarities as the brand-name counterparts (more on this later). And, while there are some differences, generics don't really change the effectiveness of the drug's active ingredient: the biggest change is typically in the price (they're usually cheaper). It's good to note though, not all brand-name drugs have generic counterparts. Still curious about generic versus brand-name? Read on!

Regardless of the type of drug, the FDA requires generics to be the same as the brand-name in several respects: the active ingredients (that are responsible for the drug's effects), the dosage, and the way in which it's taken. This is called bioequivalency. Although the FDA sets a range of bioequivalency that a generic drug must meet, most generics closely align with the brand-name counterpart. Similarly, the FDA requires that generic drugs have a comparable bioavailability (the amount of time the drug takes to be absorbed into the body under identical circumstances) to the brand-name drug. Although generics have the same amount of active ingredient, the amount of time it takes for your body to absorb it may be slightly different. However, it's not enough to change the effectiveness of the drug.
So, what's the big difference? Brand-name drugs and the generics (for all drugs, not just birth control pills) may differ in the coloring, shape, and name. These features are protected by the original company. In addition, there may be some differences among the inactive ingredients, but those don't have any effect on the desired benefits of the medication. However, if a person has a negative reaction to a drug (brand name or generic), talking with a health care provider is advised to further investigate a possible intolerance or allergy to one of the inactive ingredients.

Another difference (one that may benefit you and your insurance company), is that generics typically cost less than brand-name. Brand-name drugs cost more and are protected under a 20-year patent so that the company that originally developed them can recover those development costs. The United States government has determined that 20 years is enough time for the recovery of those costs and that after this period, there is no reason for patients to be paying this extra cost. So, after those 20 years are up, other companies are free to copy the drug and create generic versions. You'll also be happy to know that generic drugs are regulated by the FDA and are required to meet the same safety and effectiveness guidelines as their brand-name counterparts. The guidelines apply to the drug itself, as well as how it's manufactured, packaged, and tested.

So, in terms of effectiveness, there aren't significant cons to taking a generic drug. In fact, there's no data to suggest that generic drugs are less efficient. The only catch is that the specific drug you're currently using may not have a generic version at this time. Your health care provider can help you figure out your options. There may be a generic form of the birth control pill you've been using or your provider can advise you on switching to a different pill (or other birth control method) with a generic version available. You may also review your options with your insurance company. Check your insurance card for their customer service contact information to get more information on what options your plan will cover.

Here's hoping this information has got you covered on the differences between generic and brand-name drugs.

Alice!

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