

Switching from a reference biologic to a biosimilar biologic

What are biologic and biosimilar drugs?

Biologics are drugs made from living cells. They are a different type of drug than traditional medications that are made using chemicals. Because biologics are made from unique living cells, there are always very small differences between batches.

Biologics are used to treat many health conditions, such as cancer, arthritis, diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease, psoriasis, and vasculitis.

Biosimilar biologics (or biosimilars) are highly similar copies of reference biologic drugs (the original brand name biologic drug) that have already been sold in Canada. They work just as well as their reference biologic.

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When drugs come onto the market, they are protected by a patent. A patent is a legal agreement that prevents other companies from making copies of the medication for a certain amount of time. When the patent for a biologic drug runs out, other companies can start to make a biosimilar version of the drug. The biosimilars must go through an approval process with Health Canada, just like any other drug.

Biosimilars are much cheaper than the reference biologic. They are cheaper because it is easier to make a biosimilar based off a biologic already available in Canada. These research savings and more competition means there is a major drop in the price of biosimilars compared to reference biologics.

Switching from reference biologics to biosimilars can save health systems and drug plans hundreds of millions of dollars in the short term. This money can be invested back into the health system where it is needed.

Safety of switching

Switching between a biologic and a biosimilar is safe.

Experts agree that there are no real differences in the way that reference biologics and biosimilar biologics work or in their safety. While there may be small differences in the drugs themselves, studies have shown that they work equally well to treat your health condition and are just as safe.

Many patients have already switched from reference biologics to biosimilar drugs.

Switching from a reference biologic to a biosimilar has already been happening in many countries and in Canada. This means that thousands of people with the same condition as you have likely already switched from a reference biologic to the biosimilar.

How to switch

Switching is normally simple and straightforward.

If you are currently taking a biologic drug and there is a biosimilar available, you may be asked by your health care provider or drug plan to switch.

Your doctor must approve the change from a reference biologic to a biosimilar (in most cases).

Your pharmacist cannot change your drug to a biosimilar without approval.

If you are curious about switching but have not been asked, talk to your health care team.

If you are switched, your health care provider will talk to you about the biosimilar. They will talk to you about your injection or infusion, including how and where it is administered. There may also be a patient support program to register for that could provide you help with setting up appointments at a clinic, financial assistance, third-party coverage, and other support.

Talk to your medical team about switching

If a switching policy is started by the government or your drug plan company, they may not keep paying for the more expensive reference biologic. In this case, you may need to pay for the reference biologic drug if you do not want to switch to the biosimilar. In instances where your medication is delivered in the hospital (e.g., cancer centre), the hospital may have removed the reference biologic from their list of approved drugs to prescribe. Please discuss these matters with your medical team to arrive at a solution that is right for you.

For more information about biosimilars

Your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist can answer any questions you have about switching from a reference biologic to a biosimilar. Everyone wants to make sure that you are comfortable with this change.

There are a number of pamphlets on biologics and biosimilars available at cancercareontario.ca/en/cancer-care-ontario/programs/provincial-drug-reimbursement/biosimilars-initiatives/health-care

canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/biologics-radiopharmaceuticals-genetic-therapies/applications-submissions/guidance-documents/fact-sheet-biosimilars.html