

This document is intended to help pharmacy teams answer questions from GPs or members of the public about shortages of medicines.

What is causing the medicines supply issues?

Supply issues are often driven by several factors, ranging from problems at the manufacturing stage (e.g. a lack of raw ingredients) through to distribution issues and changing levels of demand. Disruptions can fluctuate rapidly and on a localised basis. Recently, disruption has been driven by macroeconomic factors relating to the impact of Brexit and COVID on supply and distribution chains, whilst medicine prices have been driven up by increases in many manufacturing and distribution costs, such as rises in fuel and utility bills caused by global economic instability.

How can I check which medicines are experiencing supply issues?

There is no publicly available list of medicines in short supply in the UK and the peaks and troughs of medication supply experienced by pharmacies means it is difficult to advise GP or patients as to when supplies may be running short. Stock availability can vary on a daily basis and geographically, one area of the country may be affected whilst other areas are not.

In some cases, when products are affected by serious shortages, Health Ministers may grant Serious Shortage Protocols (SSPs). SSPs allow pharmacists to supply a different strength or formulation (or possibly an alternative) to the prescribed drug, helping patients to access the treatment they need more quickly. The [current SSPs list](#) is mostly HRT products.

Why is my local pharmacy telling me they cannot obtain stock when nationally there is stock available?

The information regarding stock availability can sometimes be misleading. Manufacturers can claim no stock issues when this is not the case locally. Sometimes stock availability issues are linked to specific wholesaler sites e.g. Leeds Depot has no stock but in other parts of the country stock is readily available. In addition, depending on the wholesaler account a pharmacy has, they will have access (or not) to different stock information from the same wholesaler.

There is also no obligation for a pharmacy to have more than one wholesale account and because pharmacies usually need to pay a monthly fee for their secondary wholesaler account, most pharmacies restrict the number of accounts they use. Where pharmacies do have access to more than one wholesaler, there can be delays when items are ordered from the secondary wholesaler. It should be noted that pharmacies can incur surcharges when wholesaler order value is below a certain amount.

Even if an item shows as 'in stock' when the pharmacy checks or places their order with the wholesaler, there is no guarantee this will arrive in their delivery. There have been multiple reports that stock ordered for set deliveries does not arrive. This can exacerbate issues especially when the item is urgent i.e. for end of life care.

Medicines supply is complex, variable and impacted by many factors. A reliable single list of medicines with supply issues cannot be created. A check for known, enduring national supply issues in the [Medicines Supply Tool](#) hosted on the Specialist Pharmacy Service (SPS) website, but note that this does not reflect all the medicines with supply issues.

The absence of a drug on this site does not indicate that there is not an issue with supply.

What impacts are these shortages having on prescribers?

GPs may increasingly be contacted by pharmacies and asked to consider alternatives if stock is unobtainable. GPs and pharmacies should share telephone numbers not accessible to patients, through which pharmacies and prescribers can be easily contacted to resolve medicines supply issues and agree alternative medicines to be prescribed for patients. (*see additional note on communication route below*).

Prescriptions for alternative medicines may need to be issued so that patients can receive treatment more quickly. Duplicate prescriptions may need to be issued to allow a patient to see if stock is available from an alternative pharmacy. NB Patient choice must be considered when deciding whether to issue an alternative medicine or duplicate prescription. Prescribers are requested to resist writing prescriptions for longer periods of time as this could exacerbate supply issues. Patients should be encouraged to order repeat prescriptions in good time and only to reorder the medicines needed.

Note on communication route

We are all busy people. Making it easy and quick to communicate between community pharmacy and general practice helps reduce time wasted while waiting in a call queue or finding a phonenumber repeatedly engaged. It is very likely that while waiting to be connected, a patient is waiting in the pharmacy or practice for their query to be dealt with. Long delays result in frustration and on occasion aggression toward the pharmacy and practice staff.

We recommend that:

- Community pharmacies should share any second phone line numbers with the GP practice. Ideally this should be recorded on NHS Service Finder.
- GP practices should share the dedicated HCP line with the community pharmacy. Ideally this should be recorded on NHS Service Finder.
- If the practice has a dedicated prescribing admin team, they should ensure the local pharmacies know how to contact them to manage queries on repeat prescription orders.
- If the practice has a GP practice / PCN pharmacist ensure they have made contact with the local community pharmacies to discuss how best to communicate and develop the professional relationship.
- Discuss the use of NHSmail locally and agree which email address is best to use, how often is the email checked for new messages and any requests for how emails are addressed / formatted to make it easy to identify which are for urgent attention and which are more routine.

The Community Pharmacist Consultation Service (CPCS) requires practices to share their dedicated HCP line with pharmacies to use when patient require an urgent same day appointment See here: <https://www.pulsetoday.co.uk/resource/pulse-intelligence/how-collaborating-with-local-pharmacies-saves-us-time/>

What are community pharmacy teams are doing in response to current supply problems?

Pharmacy teams are working hard to make sure patients get the medicines they need when they need them. If a medicine is not in stock, pharmacy teams will often do one or more of the following:

- Make many phone calls to different suppliers to try to find the medicine.

- Check if stock may be available in other local pharmacies.
- Liaise with GPs to find a different medicine that may be suitable.

What advice can I give to patients about the current issues with medicines availability?

Further information for patients is available in PSNC's [medicines supply information leaflet](#).

How do I report problems obtaining medicines and/or issues regarding pricing of medicines available?

If you are experiencing problems obtaining medicines and/or need to highlight medicines pricing issues, please use the PSNC website page [here](#).

How should I let prescribers know about medicines shortages?

Stock shortages continue to be a significant problem and effective communication with prescribers is essential to reduce delays obtaining alternatives for patients. Proactive, well-planned communication also helps to reduce the workload of pharmacy and surgery teams and to maintain positive relationships. Information about effective communication along with forms to be used to suggest suitable alternatives for surgeries and for dealing with more general problems can be found below.

[Stock Shortages: SBAR Guide – July 2019](#)

Where can I find additional information and advice?

- RPS - [Dealing with Medicines Shortages in Community Pharmacy](#)
- PSNC – [Medicines Shortages](#)
- CPWY – [Medicines Shortages](#)
- DoH – [A Guide to Managing Medicines Supply & Shortages](#)