

Antibiotic shortages

Clinicians working in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector



About this resource

This resource provides general information for health professionals working in Aboriginal Medical Services or Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations. It applies to doctors, nurses, pharmacists and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners. It gives you details on what to do and where to go for further information about antibiotic shortages.

Why are antibiotic shortages important?

Medicines shortages are an increasing problem, and can occur with little warning. Local pharmacies may encounter difficulties obtaining stock whilst other areas have no issue obtaining stock.

Medicines shortages can impact the quality and effectiveness of antibiotics, including:

- Medication safety risks e.g. errors due to unfamiliar medicines.
- Sub-optimal treatment options e.g. use of alternative antibiotics that may be less effective or more toxic.
- Increased costs and work e.g. staff time to manage the shortage, patients not getting medication due to extra cost of alternative agents. Sometimes alternatives are not covered by the PBS.
- Increased risk of antimicrobial resistance e.g. use of broader-spectrum antibiotics.

Where to find information about antibiotic shortages?

Pharmaceutical companies report medicines shortages to the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) and these are published on the [Medicine shortage reports database](#). Check this database to find out what antibiotics are in short supply.

Find out about local availability of antibiotics including other brands, strengths or a different form by talking to local pharmacy or health service. The [NACCHO newsletter](#) is another good source of information.

What to do if the antibiotic of choice is not available

Collaboration between health professionals and patients is key to managing care during medicines shortages. Generally, you can consider:

- A different brand of antibiotic.
- A different strength of antibiotic.
- A different form e.g. a tablet or capsule instead of a liquid. A pharmacist can advise if the tablet or capsule can be crushed or dispersed. If the shortage is for an intravenous antibiotic, an oral switch may be appropriate.



There are also some specific measures and guides available during medicines shortages:

Pharmacists may substitute specific medicines without prior approval from the prescriber under the [Serious Scarcity Substitution Instruments \(SSSIs\)](#) issued by the TGA. This means that, patients can receive their medicines from their pharmacist without delay, and treatments are not interrupted.

Alternatively, the TGA may approve the temporary supply of an overseas-registered product. These products are not automatically listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), which means for some products, there may be additional costs to the patient. A list of [PBS-subsidised S19A medicines](#) is available.



Local information here, if required.

Finally, the prescriber may consider a different antibiotic. Check the [Antibiotic prescribing in primary care: Therapeutic Guidelines summary table 2023](#). This summarises information in Therapeutic Guidelines about the management of common conditions in primary care.

Consider restricting the use of antibiotics for specific indications or patient populations if there is a shortage with limited alternatives.

Changes in medicines may result in different costs for your patients. The pharmacist can advise on cost.

If you have trouble accessing or deciding on an antibiotic, consider contacting your local hospital pharmacy department. You may find further support from the [ACCHO Medicines Management Guidelines](#) or your local ACCHO clinical governance unit.



What to tell your patients?

Let your patient know:

- There is difficulty obtaining this medication and how long this is expected to continue for (if known).
- To talk to their doctor, pharmacist, nurse, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners if they cannot get the antibiotic.
- An antibiotic may come in a different strength. This might mean they will need to take a different number of tablets or capsules or break a tablet. Patients should check with their health professional to find out how to take it.
- Patients might receive a tablet or capsule instead of a liquid. Patients should ask if they can crush a tablet or open and empty the capsule. Let your patient know there are things they can do to make it easier to take the medicine. The pharmacist can help with this.
- How long to take the antibiotic for.

Give your patient a copy of the [consumer resource](#).

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Useful resources

- Therapeutic Guidelines Antibiotic. [Antibiotic prescribing in primary care: Therapeutic Guidelines summary table 2023](#).
- Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) [Medicine shortage reports database](#). The database will provide an estimate of the duration of the shortage and may tell you of alternative medicines available.
- The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care has [general information for prescribers and pharmacists](#) on how to manage shortages in acute and primary healthcare settings.
- National Centre for Antimicrobial Stewardship – [Medication Shortage Fact Sheets](#). This site provides information about prescribing choices and alternatives for common infections.
- National Centre for Antimicrobial Stewardship – [Community Information Sheets](#). Information sheets about common infections designed for use during consultations in general practice clinic.
- [AMH Children's Dosing Companion](#) – Administration of medicines to children.
- [Central Australian Rural Practitioners Association \(CARPA\) Standard Treatment Manual](#)
- [Guidelines for pharmacists supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with Medicines Management](#)
- [ACCHO Medicines Management Guidelines](#).

Join the [NACCHO Medicines Network](#)

This is a communication network for people working within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector to learn and share information about medicines activities and projects.

By signing up, receive the **monthly NACCHO Medicines Network Update**. The Update provides information regarding recent changes to PBS medicines, new medicines related resources, program information, pharmacy-related news and more. It also provides a monthly summary of TGA shortages.

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National Aboriginal Community
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