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BRANDED VS GENERIC

Cutting the cost of buying over-the-counter medicines

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Executive summary

Many are aware that branded and generic medicines often have the same active pharmaceutical ingredient – and that it's possible to slash the cost of buying drugs by opting for the generic version. But fewer realise the sheer scale of the price differential, and the extent to which medicines marketed in different ways under the same brand can be very similar drugs.

This report summarises MoneySavingExpert.com's investigation in June 2016 into the price difference between branded and generic medication. Among our key findings:

- Branded medication costs on average nearly three times as much as generic equivalents that do the same job, based on a sample of 15 common over-the-counter medicines. And this is looking at the cheapest prices for both, not the most expensive.
- The worst offender we found was Nurofen – which was eight times the cost of a generic equivalent – followed by Clarityn and then Anadin Paracetamol.
- Even some 'own-brand' generics sold by major pharmacy chains Boots and Lloyds are more than three times the price of the cheapest generic equivalent – and can actually cost MORE than branded equivalents.
- Major brands often have different packages for products with the same active ingredients, such as Nurofen Migraine Pain and Nurofen Tension Headache.

This report has been written with expert input from Professor Jayne Lawrence, chief scientist at the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, and a second working pharmacist with 37 years' experience – they provided detailed information on how the medicines we looked at are made, and also checked our comparisons.

MoneySavingExpert hopes this research will help consumers make an informed decision when buying over-the-counter medicines, and help ensure they get the best deal.

Background

Pharmaceutical companies typically spend millions of pounds marketing their products to consumers in a bid to recoup the vast expense of developing a drug in the first place.

The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry estimates that on average each new drug brought to market costs £1.15 billion to research, develop and advertise. It says for every one medicine that makes it to licensing stage, another 25,000 will have been tested, and 25 are likely to have had clinical trials.

It generally takes a company between 10 and 15 years to research and develop a drug, but in the UK the standard patent is only 20 years – meaning pharmaceutical companies only typically enjoy exclusive rights to manufacture for between five and 10 years.

After a patent expires, other companies can manufacture their own version of the drug, and it will then generally be sold at much lower prices by them as they do not have to recoup the research and development costs.

Regulatory authorities such as the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) thoroughly check all medicines, generic and branded, to ensure they meet the same standards.

Our investigation

Branded vs generic – the price difference revealed

To examine the scale of the price difference between branded and generic medicines, we compared the cost of 15 common over-the-counter products over a week in late June. We looked for the cheapest price we could find, in store and online where possible, at Asda, Boots, Home Bargains, Lloyds, Poundstretcher, Sainsbury's, Savers, Superdrug and Tesco.

We've shown our findings below, ranked in order of the biggest percentage price difference.

Branded medicine	Cheapest price	Generic equivalent	Cheapest price	Saving as a percentage
Nurofen (16)	£1.98 Asda	Ibuprofen (16)	25p Asda	87%
Clarityn (30)	£6 Sainsbury's ⁱ	Loratadine (30)	£1 Savers	83%
Anadin Paracetamol (16)	£1 Savers	Paracetamol (16)	19p Asda	81%
Nurofen Joint and Back Pain gel (35g)	£4 Asda	Ibuprofen gel (35g)	99p Home Bargains	75%
Piriteze (30)	£6 Sainsbury's ⁱ	Cetirizine (30)	£1.49 Poundstretcher	75%
Sudafed Blocked Nose capsules (12)	£2.39 Lloyds	Max strength congestion relief	60p Sainsbury's	75%
Anadin Extra (16)	£1.99 Lloyds	Aspirin Extra (16)	54p Asda	73%
Imodium Original (6)	£2.19 Savers	Loperamide (6)	59p Home Bargains	73%
Nurofen Kids 100ml	£3.15 Sainsbury's	Ibuprofen 3mths	95p Savers	70%
Vicks Sinex Micromist 15ml	£3 Asda	Nasal decongestant spray 15ml	£1 Asda/Tesco	67%
Calpol Infant 2 months+ 100ml	£2.98 Asda	Infant Paracetamol Suspension 100ml	£1.09 Home Bargains	63%
Corsodyl 300ml	£4.49 Superdrug	Chlorhexidine 300ml	£2 Sainsbury's	55%
Nurofen migraine (12)	£2.65 Sainsbury's	Migraine relief (12)	£1.35 Asda	49%
Lemsip Max sachets (10)	£2.69 Savers	Max strength cold and flu (10)	£1.76 Asda	35%
Piriton (30)	£3 Sainsbury's	Chlorphenamine Maleate (30)	£2.75 Tesco	8%

Verified with assistance from the Royal Pharmaceutical Society for medicine containing the same active ingredient and formulation. ⁱ Usually £9.

Generics aren't for everyone – what to look out for

While generic equivalents usually beat branded medicines on price and have the same active pharmaceutical ingredients, it's worth noting they're not identical. Shoppers should be aware that although the active ingredient will be the same, the other ingredients in branded and generic medication can differ. So make sure you're aware of any possible allergic reactions and ensure the medication you choose is correct for you – if in doubt, check with the pharmacist or your GP.

It's always worth noting that the flavour and taste of generic medication can differ from branded products too.

The massive mark-up on some 'own-brand' generics

While it's already widely known that generic equivalents are much cheaper than branded medicines, our investigation also looked at the cost of major stores' 'own-brand' generics.

Shoppers might assume that these would be competitively priced, and often they are, with Asda, for example, stocking one of the cheapest non-branded generics we could find.

Yet we found that in some cases there was a massive difference in cost, with some hay fever 'own-brand' generics more than three times the price of the cheapest generics out there.

Surprisingly, in some cases 'own-brand' generics were actually MORE expensive than branded equivalents, for example Boots' own-brand cetirizine was £8.19, compared with £6 Piriteze at Sainsbury's, for the same pack size.

Active ingredient	Asda	Boots	Lloyds	Sainsbury's	Tesco	Cheapest brand	Cheapest generic
Cetirizine (30)	£2.50	£8.19	£7.79	£2.75	£2.75	£6 ⁱⁱ	£1.49
Max strength cold & flu ⁱ	£1.76	£2.99	£2.79	£2	£1.80	£2.69	£1.76
Loperamide (6)	£1	£1.99	n/a	£1	£1	£2.19	59p
Loratadine (30)	£2.50	£8.19	£7.99	n/a	£2.75	£6 ⁱⁱ	£1
Paracetamol suspension 100ml	£1.75	£2.65	£2.29	£1.90	£2	£2.98	£1.09

Verified with assistance from the Royal Pharmaceutical Society for medicine containing the same active ingredient and formulation. ⁱ Paracetamol 1000mg, phenylephrine hydrochloride 12.2mg. ⁱⁱ Usually £9.

It's worth noting though that when we mystery-shopped five Boots stores, we were offered both Boots' own-brand generic and the much-cheaper non-Boots generic.

A Boots spokesperson says: "We are committed to offering great value and healthcare products and advice to our customers. We offer a wide range of hay fever and allergy treatments from various brands, allowing our customers to choose according to their own preference. Our trained healthcare team are available to advise our customers on how best to treat their symptoms, and when appropriate to recommend a cheaper, suitable alternative."

A Lloyds Pharmacy spokesperson says: "Lloyds Pharmacy offers the expert advice to ensure our customers find the right solution for their allergy needs. We have a range of combination therapies available including tablets, nasal sprays and eye drops, with promotional deals that offer great savings when customers purchase across all of these categories."

Different marketing of similar medicines

Medicines containing the same active ingredient can be marketed in many different ways, so at first glance they may appear to the consumer to be entirely different products.

The MHRA allows non-prescription medicines to have "informative" names, such as Blogs Pain Relief, to help customers choose a product without the help of pharmacy staff.

However, our investigation gives an idea of just how widespread the practice of marketing similar medicines in different ways is. For example, we found eight Nurofen products with ibuprofen as an active ingredient.

There can be variations of the same active ingredient

It's not quite as simple as comparing the active ingredient though. Many medicines can have the same active ingredient, but be made in slightly different ways that mean they cannot be directly compared.

Ibuprofen, for example, comes in various forms, such as lysine, sodium, or liquid capsules. While being fundamentally the same drug, the way these are made can have an effect on how quickly they work – for example, liquid capsules can work faster than tablets.

Even accounting for this, we identified from Boots.com at least eight medications with different "informative names", which the Royal Pharmaceutical Society told us had the same active ingredient and formulation as another product on sale – see the list below:

Ibuprofen 200mg Liquid Capsules

- Anadin Ultra
- Anadin Period Pain

Ibuprofen Lysine 342mg

- Nurofen Migraine
- Nurofen Tension Headache

Paracetamol 500mg, Caffeine 25mg, Phenylephrine Hydrochloride 6.1mg

- Sudafed Mucus Relief Day and Night
- Sudafed Congestion and Headache Relief

Paracetamol 250mg, Guaifenesin 100mg, Phenylephrine Hydrochloride 5mg

- Benylin Chesty Cough and Cold tablets
- Benylin Mucus Cough and Cold All in One Relief tablets



Different but similar: The active ingredient for both is ibuprofen 200mg in liquid capsule form.

In all but one case there was no price difference between the products, but we feel this type of approach to marketing, for products with the same active ingredients and same formulation, could add to the confusion of customers.

A spokesperson for Reckitt Benckiser, which manufactures Lemsip and Nurofen, says: “Within our Nurofen and Lemsip portfolios we have a range of products (including those with different formulas, formulations and doses). It ensures we meet consumers’ needs and provide easy navigation, particularly within the grocery environment where pharmacy support isn’t available.”

Johnson & Johnson, which manufactures Benylin and Sudafed, declined to comment. Pfizer, which manufactures Anadin, was unavailable for comment.

Are shoppers confident choosing generic medication over branded?

The most recent MoneySavingExpert poll in June 2016 showed 73% of the 19,268 people who voted will choose the cheapest medication they can find, regardless of brand.

In both the under-30 and 30 to 49-year-old categories, 71% said they would buy the cheapest regardless of brand, and this jumped to 77% in the over-50 category.

Just 3% said they tended to buy branded medicines.

It’s important to bear in mind though that this was a self-selecting poll of savvy shoppers, and is unlikely to be representative of the wider population.

What about independent and online pharmacies?

Our research has focused primarily on over-the-counter medicines bought in store at major chains.

We excluded independent pharmacies from our research as pricing can vary widely, though these are worth factoring in if you’re buying, as pricing can be competitive. We also excluded internet pharmacies due to the cost of delivery if you’re not bulk-buying.

Conclusion

Our research reveals the true extent of price differences between branded and generic drugs. We believe more must be done to educate the public about the way in which over-the-counter medicines are marketed, and the fact they may be able to buy a generic equivalent if they don’t want to pay more for a branded product.

Particular attention should be drawn to the price difference between ‘own-brand’ medicines and cheaper generics, as this is less well-known, and in some cases can be as big a difference as between branded products and generics.

Shoppers should be aware that pharmaceutical companies, including those that produce generic medication, are allowed to include “informative” names on their products and market similar medications in different ways.

We hope that this report will help raise awareness of the marked price differential between various types of over-the-counter medicines, and that shoppers will at least feel confident enough to ask for professional advice if they are unsure whether they could be paying less for their medication.

Here are our top five tips to avoid paying over the odds (for more tips, see [20 Medicine Savings](#)).

- 1** Compare the active ingredients of products, which should be clearly marked on the box.
- 2** Always feel confident to ask at the pharmacy for the cheapest generic version of a medicine.
- 3** Ask a doctor or pharmacist if there are any issues using a different medicine, particularly regarding any allergies.
- 4** Don’t assume a certain shop will be cheaper. Our investigation shows pharmacies, supermarkets and even pound shops, where people might not expect to buy medicine, can win on price for different products.
- 5** Prices change so always check before you buy, and also consider whether an independent or online pharmacy could be cheaper.