
Solutions to UK Medicines Shortages

By the British Generic Manufacturers Association (BGMA)



Introduction

The core purpose of those involved in the supply of medicines is, and always will be, to ensure the right prescription gets to the right patient at the right time. This unifying aim brings together the people who make medicines, those who sell and transport them, and the individuals in pharmacies who dispense them. However, this shared objective is becoming increasingly challenging due to the rising number of medicines facing supply issues. As a result, many more patients are finding it difficult to access the treatments they need. The British Generic Manufacturers Association (BGMA) is the trade body for off-patent medicines, which fulfil four out of five prescription medicines used by NHS patients.

We track NHS England data monthly and are now seeing twice as many medicines experiencing shortages as there were two years ago. Some products have been out of stock for many months, if not longer. The vast majority are commonly used generic medicines.

Although shortages remain a small percentage of the total number of medicines available, the consequences for patients are real and serious, and include reduced physical health, increased anxiety and the stress of not knowing whether an important treatment will be available. Pharmacists are also facing increased workloads in trying to source alternatives while also having to reassure worried patients. The causes of shortages are multiple and varied and have been widely covered in the media as well as in a 2024 health select committee hearing into pharmacy. To identify solutions to shortages, we have spoken with our members as well as a wide range of our partners and key stakeholders to identify the causes and propose realistic and timely solutions.

This document summarises those conversations and is a set of recommendations we are putting forward which we believe can make a meaningful contribution to reducing the instances of shortages.

Why this matters

Every shortage has a critical impact on the lives of patients, and at some point, we are all patients. A recent public poll commissioned by the BGMA showed that of all adults who have had a prescription in the past two years, 49% experienced some form of shortage or delay while trying to access medicines. Of those impacted, one in six went without their medicine altogether.

Shortages always exist for various reasons, and a characteristic of a well-functioning off-patent sector is that competition provides resilience, because suppliers can step in when issues are identified. However, we have witnessed the number of products facing supply challenges double in the past two years and remain at a high level since September 2023.

To help address these problems, we felt it was important to bring forward a range of potential solutions based on our experience and conversations with our members and key partners.

In our view it is critical to hear a breadth of views on a topic such as medicines shortages and to co-create solutions as no one part of the supply chain can solve this in isolation.

This document contains a summary of the potential actions which could be implemented to help address the problem of shortages and have a lasting impact. Some are longer term, but many could be put in place almost immediately. These practical recommendations can be the basis for improvement and a means for accelerating change.

We hope the document will also stimulate further discussion and exchange of ideas among others involved in the supply of medicines to patients.

Mark Samuels

Chief Executive of the British Generic Manufacturers Association (BGMA)

Recommended Solutions

Based on extensive conversations and engagement with our members and supply chain partners, we have developed a series of recommendations which we believe can help alleviate the issues of shortages. We have divided our solutions into three categories where policy change could help reduce the number of supply issues.

1) Policies that reduce the overall number of shortages

The first set of recommendations focus on policy changes which would make a difference to the current situation where we are seeing a sustained period of relatively high numbers of shortages. These include:

- When awarding future hospital medicines tenders, include scoring based on supply chain resilience and past supplier performance.
- Tender scoring should include whether supply issues were reported with adequate notice. Suppliers should be informed of changes in prescribing more quickly.
- For hospital medicines' tenders, there is no commitment to buy from the NHS. Pilot a commitment to purchase for key lines or those with persistent supply problems.
- Medicine manufacturing now takes half a year. For hospital medicines contracts, offer lead times of at least 20 weeks from the award to the contract start date.
- Ask the Government to review pharmacy reimbursement funding levels. The Bank of England states that (CPI) inflation has risen 24% since current deal was agreed in 2019.
- Encourage suppliers to review their dormant UK licences in areas of reduced supply resilience through identification of lines and quick re-establishment of licences.
- Review extending shelf life of products so that there is less wastage and suppliers can more easily use stock to meet demand.
- Caution against ill-thought through country-by-country stockpiling initiatives that reduce flexibility to respond to where medicines are needed.
- Use public funds to support more domestic manufacturing as part of approach to build more supply resilience, as well as more capability in the face of a pandemic.

2) Policies that reduce the impact of shortages when they do occur

The second area we have considered is what can be done when new shortages occur in the future. These include:

- Consider allowing more substitution in pharmacy as supply issues start to become clear.
- Fast track approval for necessary changes to improve supply chain and delivery (e.g. additional API sources, changes in pack sizes).
- Review how suppliers provide information to DHSC/NHSE when potential or actual shortages occur and how this can be more communicated in a timelier way.

3) Future areas of focus

The final area we have considered and discussed are solutions which are forward-looking and future focussed and would need multiple organisational support to take forward. These include:

- Build in a review of the impact of the 2024 voluntary scheme for branded medicines pricing, access, and growth (VPAG) and its payment percentage levels on supply issues.
- With Government and NHS support, trade associations to host workshops to provide industry with a better understanding of future trends in demand for specified treatments.
- Government, NHS, and industry to do more to encourage self-care and discouraging patient overordering.
- ICB medicines management teams to analyse impact of prescribing and initiate more existing patient medicines reviews.
- Develop innovative ways to improve patient adherence.
- Set up an annual national 'health-check' roundtable between stakeholders on the supply chain performance in each year and horizon-scan the next.

Conclusion

As manufacturers of off-patent medicines which fulfil the vast majority of prescription medicines in the UK, we have a critical perspective on what contributes to supply issues. These issues cannot be solved in isolation, and we passionately believe they require new thinking and solutions. This document represents the output of discussions with a range of key partners, and we hope it will positively contribute to further cross-industry discussions. As an industry body, we will continue to focus on supply issues to ensure patients are able to access the treatments they need in a timely manner.

