Pharmacy Benefact

A BULLETIN FOR PHARMACY SERVICE PROVIDERS FROM ALBERTA BLUE CROSS

Number 837• January 2020

Alberta Biosimilar Initiative—patient support letter and resources

Effective December 12, 2019, the Alberta government, under the Alberta Biosimilar Initiative, changed the funding of select biologic medications for adult patients on Alberta government-sponsored drug plans. Patients currently on an originator drug for which there is a biosimilar version for their health condition must switch to its biosimilar version before July 1, 2020 in order to maintain coverage for the molecule through their Alberta government-sponsored drug plan. Effective July 1, 2020, Alberta Health will no longer provide coverage for the originator brand drugs (refer to Benefact 826 for more information).

To communicate these changes, affected members with a current address on file will receive the appended letter and patient information sheet. You may choose to refer to these documents when discussing these changes with your patients. Additional resources may be found at **https://www.ab.bluecross.ca/providers/pharmacy-resources.php** including a *Healthcare Professionals Guide*.

As a reminder, Alberta's Biosimilar Initiative affects the following government sponsored plans:

- Non-Group Coverage (Group 1)
- Coverage for Seniors (Group 66)
- Palliative Coverage (Group 20514. Note: Client may have Group 1 or Group 66 coverage)
- Child and Family Services (Group 20403)
- Alberta Child Health Benefit (Group 20400)
- Children and Youth Services (Group 19824)
- Income Support (Group 19823)
- Learners Program (Group 22128)
- Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (Group 19823)
- Alberta Adult Health Benefit (Group 23609)

When you have questions:

For assistance with benefit or claim inquiries, please contact an Alberta Blue Cross Pharmacy Services Provider Relations contact centre representative at:

780-498-8370 (Edmonton and area) • **403-294-4041** (Calgary and area) • **1-800-361-9632** (toll free)

FAX 780-498-8406 (Edmonton and area) • **FAX 1-877-305-9911** (toll free)

Alberta Blue Cross offers online access to current Pharmacy Benefacts and supplemental claiming information to assist with the submission of your direct bill drug claims. **Visit** ab.bluecross.ca/providers/pharmacy-home.php

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Sequence Number
First Name, Last Name
Address 1, Address 2
City, Province, Postal Code

Date

Dear *First Name, Last Name*

This letter is to advise you of a change to coverage for biologic drugs on government sponsored plans that may affect your prescription for *Biosimilar Drug Name*.

On December 12, 2019, the Alberta government introduced the Alberta Biosimilar Initiative. The Alberta Biosimilar Initiative aims to expand the use of lower cost biosimilars on its government sponsored drug programs. Savings from this Initiative will help ensure Alberta has a patient-centered health system focused on providing the high-quality care Albertans deserve.

The changes associated with the Alberta Biosimilar Initiative will affect originator biologic medications and their biosimilar versions. The first version of a biologic drug is called an originator or reference biologic drug. A biosimilar drug is a biologic drug that is very similar to but less expensive than its originator biologic drug. Health Canada says that patients and health care professionals can have confidence that biosimilars are effective and safe for each of their authorized health conditions. Tests are done to help ensure there are no expected differences in how the drug works and the safety of a biosimilar compared to the originator biologic drug.

Adult patients currently on an originator biologic drug for which there is a biosimilar version for their medical condition must switch to the biosimilar before July 1, 2020 in order to maintain coverage for that drug through an Alberta government sponsored drug plan. The Alberta Biosimilar Initiative does not apply to other coverage such as employer group coverage.

Please refer to the enclosed Patient Information sheet for additional information and for a list of affected drug products and health conditions.

Please contact your health care professional to discuss this change and to obtain a new prescription for *Biosimilar Drug Name*. Switching does not apply to pregnant patients, if applicable, please speak with your health care professional regarding an exception request for the duration of your pregnancy.

If you have any questions, please speak with your health care professional. You may also contact us at 1-800-661-6995.

Patient information
Switching to a biosimilar drug

BIOLOGICS VS BIOSIMILARS

Biologics are drugs made in, taken from or partly-made from living cells through a complex manufacturing process. The first version of a biologic drug is called an originator biologic drug but may also be called an innovator or reference biologic.

A biosimilar drug, or biosimilar, is a biologic drug that is very similar to but less expensive than its originator biologic drug. Biosimilars become available after the patent on the originator biologic drug expires. There are no expected differences in efficacy and safety between a biosimilar and the originator biologic drug.

WHY IS THIS CHANGE HAPPENING?

Alberta spent more than $238 million in the 2018 to 2019 fiscal year on biologic drugs, and these costs are increasing every year. Costs per patient for originator biologics can be more than $25,000 per patient per year, with biosimilar versions costing up to 50 per cent less than originator biologics.

Alberta is implementing the Biosimilar Initiative which will save approximately $30 million annually that can be invested into other health care services for Albertans.

WHAT IS CHANGING?

Albertans using certain originator biologic drugs that are covered by an Alberta government sponsored drug plans will need to switch to the biosimilar version by June 30, 2020 to continue coverage of that drug. Effective July 1, 2020, the Alberta government sponsored drug plans will no longer reimburse the originator biologic.

For individuals starting a biologic or changing their biologic drug, a tiered framework will apply requiring cost-effective biologic agents to be used first. However, there are several medication options available to continue to provide choice to patients and physicians.

IMPORTANT:

Call your health care professional before July 1 to discuss switching.

Your health care professional can

- answer questions about switching from an originator biologic drug to a biosimilar,
- explain the process for switching,
- discuss biosimilar options,
- write a new prescription, and
- enroll you in a new patient support program, if appropriate.

You are affected by these changes if you are an adult member enrolled in one of these government sponsored drug plans provided through Alberta Blue Cross:

- Non-Group Coverage (Group 1)
- Coverage for Seniors (Group 66)
- Palliative Coverage (Group 20514)
- Child and Family Services (Group 20403)
- Alberta Child Health Benefit (Group 20400)
- Children and Youth Services (Group 19824)
- Income Support (Group 19823)
- Learners Program (Group 22128)
- Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (Group 19823)
- Alberta Adult Health Benefit (Group 23609)

SAFETY AND EFFECTIVENESS

Health Canada must review and approve all drugs before they can be sold in Canada. Both originator biologics and biosimilar drugs are authorized for sale by Health Canada. Health Canada approves biosimilars for sale based on a thorough comparison to the originator biologic drug.

Health Canada says that patients and health care professionals can have confidence that biosimilars are effective and safe for each of their authorized health conditions. Tests are done to help ensure there are no expected differences in how the drug works and the safety of a biosimilar compared to the originator biologic drug.

SWITCHING

In Europe, where biosimilars have been used since 2006, more than 40 biosimilar products have been approved and are on the market, accounting for nearly a billion patient days of experience spanning 12 years. There are also numerous research studies showing that patients who have switched to a biosimilar experience little to no difference between the biosimilar and its biologic originator.

If you are using an originator biologic drug listed in the second column of the table below for one of the listed health conditions, you will need to speak to your health care professionals[1].

Drug name	Originator brand name	Biosimilar brand name	Health conditions
etanercept	Enbrel	Brenzys	Ankylosing Spondylitis Rheumatoid Arthritis
		Erelzi	Ankylosing Spondylitis Psoriatic Arthritis Rheumatoid Arthritis
infliximab	Remicade	Inflectra Renflexis	Ankylosing Spondylitis Plaque Psoriasis Psoriatic Arthritis Rheumatoid Arthritis Crohn's Disease Ulcerative Colitis
insulin glargine	Lantus	Basaglar	Diabetes (Type 1 and 2)
filgrastim	Neupogen	Grastofil	Neutropenia
pegfilgrastim	Neulasta	Lapelga	Neutropenia
glatiramer[2]	Copaxone	Glatect	Multiple Sclerosis

[1] *Patients under the age of 18 years of age are not required to switch to the biosimilar at this time.*
[2] *Glatiramer is a non-biologic complex drug.*

MORE INFORMATION

If you have any questions about these changes, you should speak to your health care professional. You may also contact Alberta Blue Cross at **1-800-661-6995**.