

AN A TO Z OF NHS BS

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Introduction

The government's reiterations that the NHS should work more efficiently should be welcomed. Yet small changes to how it procures prescriptions could lead to significant savings.

Doctors should not prescribe branded medicines when the non-branded alternatives provide the same benefits to patients. Whilst there are patented medicines which necessarily preclude this, the default position of clinical staff should be to prescribe the cheaper option. Equally, when branded products are cheaper, these should be prescribed.

An examination of prescriptions issued by the NHS in 2016 shows a wide array of products, with numerous instances of over the counter medicines and food supplements being prescribed and a heavy reliance on branded items.

Below is an A-Z list of items that were prescribed last year on the NHS. Proposed cheaper (non-branded) alternatives are highlighted, as well as those which can be purchased cheaply over the counter.

- Ambre Solaire (factor 50 sun cream). A non-branded version is available for [half the price](#).
- B12. This vitamin, important for red blood cells, can be purchased for a [third of the price](#) of major branded manufacturers.
- Cod liver oil. A 550g portion is [available for £1.75](#), many times cheaper than that offered by a [health food shop](#) used for a prescription.
- Digestive biscuits. Branded gluten-free biscuits, [which were prescribed](#), are significantly more expensive than a [supermarket equivalent](#).
- E. The vitamin, helpful for eye sight and the immune system, was purchased from a branded supplier. An exact alternative from a high-street pharmacist is available for [significantly lower cost](#).
- Fusilli. At least seven different brands of this gluten-free pasta were prescribed, yet a non-branded supermarket alternative is available at [considerably lower cost](#).
- Gaviscon. An alternative, with the [same active ingredients](#), is available for [16 per cent less](#) than that which was prescribed.
- Hay fever relief. A branded version prescribed is significantly more expensive than a common high-street alternative with [the same active ingredients](#).
- Ibuprofen. The non-branded version can be purchased for [30 per cent less](#) than a high-street pharmacist that was used for a prescription (as well as being available over the counter).
- Juvela. This [range of gluten-free products](#) features heavily on the list of prescribed products, despite [cheaper brands](#) being widely available.
- Ketopine shampoo. A type of anti-dandruff shampoo is available over the counter in most pharmacies.
- Lamberts. This well-known supplement and vitamin company was used regularly for NHS prescriptions. But vitamin D3, for instance, is [almost 20 per cent cheaper](#) from other retailers.
- Multivitamins. A [non-branded version](#), with the almost the same vitamins, can be purchased for a lot less than [one branded version](#) that was prescribed.
- Nicorette. Prescriptions included £14.00 for 105 pieces of gum, against £12 for the [same number of unbranded pieces](#).

- Omega 3. 60 capsules can be purchased for [12 per cent less](#) than a supplier used by the NHS.
- Pasta. Prescriptions for gluten free pasta were approved and were purchased from a specialist retailer. A supermarket own brand equivalent, however, retails for [more than 40 per cent less](#) than most of these.
- Quinoa. A gluten-free version was prescribed.
- Rennie. This indigestion and heartburn medicine can be purchased for [32 per cent less](#) than the branded product prescribed. This has exactly the [same active ingredients](#).
- Selenium. Helpful for the immune system, [a non-branded version](#) can be purchased for one third less than a [branded product](#) that was used.
- Toothpaste. Colgate Total Advanced was prescribed. Toothpaste can be purchased for a [seventh of the cost](#).
- UltraDEX Oral Rinse. A [regular mouth wash](#), widely available over the counter.
- Vaseline. Pure [petroleum jelly](#) used as skin isolation in dry or cold conditions. Non-branded versions are available, as well as no prescription being necessary.
- Warburton's. This brand's gluten-free range features heavily on the prescriptions list.
- Xanthan Gum. A [specialist ingredient](#) for home-baking gluten-free products.
- Yakult. Prescriptions were issued for this gluten-free drink.
- Zinc. The branded retailer prescribed [charges twice the price](#) of an own-brand [supermarket version](#).

Methodology

- All items listed in the A to Z above were derived from 2016 data for GP practices in England. Published monthly, it describes the all prescribed and dispensed medicines, total number of items that were prescribed and dispensed, and the total Net Ingredient Cost and total Actual Cost of these items. This is published on a monthly basis by NHS Digital.
- When necessary, a comparison is made between the branded and non-branded medicines to ensure the active ingredients, and their ratios, are analogous. This information was available at the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence.
- All prices and price comparisons were correct at the time of checking, and may include limited-time offers and multibuy which are no longer available.

Sources

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, *British National Formulary*, (<https://bnf.nice.org.uk/drug/>), 2017.

NHS Digital, *Prescribing*, (<https://digital.nhs.uk/article/4214/Prescribing>), 2017.