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Generic Drugs: What Must Match, What May Differ

The seven things a generic has to match before it reaches a pharmacy shelf, the short list it is allowed to change, and what competition does to the price you pay.

✓ **Verified against published guidance** from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration & Cleveland Clinic · sources below

Talk to your provider or pharmacist if a medicine stops working the way it used to, or if a new side effect shows up after a switch. The FDA says small allowable differences between products made by different companies, such as certain inactive ingredients, can sometimes feel noticeable to patients, and that any side effect from a drug, brand or generic, belongs in front of your healthcare provider or pharmacist.

✓ Do This

Ask If a Generic Exists

- Not every brand drug has one
- Your pharmacist can check in seconds
- The FDA Orange Book lists them

COACH'S TIP The FDA points people to that book.

Check the Active Ingredient

- It must match the brand exactly
- Same route into the body
- Same strength, same dosage form

COACH'S TIP This is the part that does the work.

Expect a Different Look

- Color and shape may differ
- FDA: appearance does not change effect
- Fillers and flavorings may differ

COACH'S TIP Different looking is not different working.

Ask What It Actually Saves

- One competitor: about 30% less
- Ask the cash price, not just the copay
- Five competitors: nearly 85% less

COACH'S TIP Both figures are the FDA's own.

Keep One Pharmacy

- Then a single record holds it all
- The pharmacist knows your full list
- Interactions get caught

COACH'S TIP Continuity is the quiet safeguard.

Report Anything That Feels Off

- Tell your provider or pharmacist
- Brand or generic, same rule
- The FDA takes reports directly

COACH'S TIP The FDA asks for this explicitly.

✗ Do Not

Do Not Assume Cheaper Means Weaker

- Same scientific standards for quality
- Price reflects development, not potency
- Same clinical benefit and risks

COACH'S TIP This is the FDA's whole point.

Do Not Think Testing Was Skipped

- The brand's trials already ran
- Same amount, same rate, same extent
- The generic proves bioequivalence

COACH'S TIP Not skipped. Just not repeated.

Do Not Panic at a New Pill Shape

- FDA allows minor appearance changes
- Confirm the label name matches
- Color and shape are cosmetic

COACH'S TIP Read the label, not the tablet.

Do Not Skip Telling Your Doctor

- Switches belong in your record
- Especially with narrow dose drugs
- One sentence at the next visit

COACH'S TIP Thirty seconds, permanently useful.

Do Not Buy Outside a Pharmacy

- FDA inspects manufacturing plants
- Unverified sellers are not covered
- That inspection is the approval

COACH'S TIP The oversight is the product.

Do Not Stop a Medicine Alone

- Talk to the prescriber first
- Then decide it together
- Ask what the alternative is

COACH'S TIP Same rule, brand or generic.

THE NUMBERS BEHIND THIS SHEET

Three figures worth knowing

7	things a generic must match the brand on
About 30%	price drop with a single generic competitor
Nearly 85%	price drop with five generics competing

Sources: U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Generic Drug Facts · U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Generic Drugs: Questions & Answers · Cleveland Clinic, What Is a Generic Drug? **Educational content, not medical advice.** Talk with your doctor.