

September 1, 2020

UPDATE: EXPANSION OF BC PHARMACARE'S BIOSIMILARS INITIATIVE

On Thursday, August 20, the Government of British Columbia and BC PharmaCare announced the addition of a new drug to their Biosimilars Initiative, which involves transitioning patients currently using an affected originator (biologic) drug for specific indications to a corresponding biosimilar.

What is changing?

Beginning February 19, 2021, BC PharmaCare coverage for the original biologic (originator) drug, **Rituxan**, will be discontinued for affected patients, and coverage will instead be provided for the biosimilar brand versions of Rituximab (Truxima, Ruxience, and Riximyo).

Until then, BC PharmaCare will continue to cover the originator and biosimilar brands of Rituximab for all currently covered patients. This allows time for patients to manage the transition process in conjunction with their health care provider.

To ensure the biosimilar drug is covered after February 19, 2021, we are encouraging patients to talk to their specialists about transitioning options as soon as possible.

Pacific Blue Cross will follow BC PharmaCare in no longer covering this originator biologic medication and recommending a safe and effective biosimilar option instead. This means that any employee currently prescribed **Rituxan** will need to be transitioned to one of the noted biosimilar **Truxima™**, **Riximyo™**, **Ruxience™** by their physician to maintain BC PharmaCare and ongoing Pacific Blue Cross coverage. PharmaCare has physician buy-in and the PBC team will send notices to all impacted employees in the next few weeks. Based on drug claim history over the last 12 months, PBC has determined there will be minimal impact for all employers.

This continues the approach taken by Pacific Blue Cross in 2019 when BC PharmaCare coverage for the original biologic (originator) drugs Remicade, Enbrel and Lantus were discontinued for affected patients, and coverage was shifted to the biosimilar alternatives. These previous plan changes were implemented successfully.

What is the difference between biologics and biosimilars?

Biologics are made by using living organisms (such as yeast or animal cells) to produce complex proteins. These proteins are purified and injected to affect certain processes in the human body. Due to their unique, complex production and handling requirements they are also one of the costliest drug classes. Over the last decade, biologics have become increasingly prescribed to treat a wide range of acute and chronic conditions like rheumatoid arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease, anemia, hormone deficiencies, skin conditions, and some forms of cancer.

Biosimilar drugs are lower cost versions of originator biologic drugs. To be approved for use in Canada, a biosimilar must be proven equally as safe and have the same therapeutic effect as the originator. Research and development of biosimilars has grown significantly alongside biologics. Today, there are over 90 studies with over 14,000 patients involving switching from originator biologics to biosimilars.

Why is this changing?

As new treatments are developed, and new drugs enter the market, there is a need for BC PharmaCare to carefully consider how to best meet the needs of British Columbians. Across Canada, biologic drugs are a significant contributor to health care costs increasing at an unsustainable rate. Biosimilars offer substantial cost savings to the health care system, which allows for improved access to drug therapies for more people who need them.

Given the decision by BC PharmaCare, Pacific Blue Cross wants to ensure that the medications covered by benefit plans are the right drugs at the right price, to protect both the health of the employee, as well as the sustainability of their plan.

What does this mean?

Following the decision made to adopt biosimilars during past transitions, we will follow suit with this latest change in terms of transitioning our coverage structure to help promote long-term plan sustainability and ensure employees continue to receive the right treatment, at the right time, for their condition. Aligning our coverage with previous and current biosimilar transitions, and any that may arise in the future, can mean significant savings in drug plan costs. This helps to ensure employees continue to receive the best possible care while also maintaining affordable benefits plans.

Please forward this document to all departments within your organization that may require and rely on this information.

Questions

For more information about biosimilars, including a list of frequently asked questions, please visit: gov.bc.ca/biosimilars.

For any questions or employee concerns, please contact: PharmacyServices@pac.bluecross.ca