

# Canada needs essential medicines list to ensure supply

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Canada needs to create a list of essential medicines to help protect against drug shortages, argues an analysis in *CMAJ (Canadian Medical Association Journal)*

Unlike 117 other member countries of the World Health Organization (WHO), such as Australia, Norway, India and China, Canada has no essential medicines list.

An essential medicines list includes between 200 and 500 medicines that a government commits to keep in stock. The list may include prescription as well as over-the-counter drugs and natural health products.

In Canada, more than 8000 [pharmaceutical drugs](#) are licensed for sale.

"Establishing an essential medicines list of perhaps 500 items could go a long way to ensuring availability of at least one drug for each health need encountered in ambulatory and inpatient settings," writes Dr. Jacalyn Duffin, who holds the Hannah Chair, History of Medicine, at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, with coauthors.

Drug shortages, which can have serious consequences, may still occur, despite having an essential medicines list because global shortages can limit supplies. Identifying important medicines and working globally to improve availability and plan for contingencies can help governments avoid, or mitigate, shortages.

The authors also suggest that an essential medicines list could be part of a national pharmacare program in Canada because it could help identify medications that must be funded as part of a plan.

"An essential medicines list, by itself, cannot solve the problem of shortages," write the authors. "Strong political action is needed to support creation of a Canadian essential medicines list both as a way to support national pharmacare and to support coordinated global efforts to mitigate [drug shortages](#)."

**More information:** *Canadian Medical Association Journal*,  
[www.cmaj.ca/lookup/doi/10.1503/cmaj.160134](http://www.cmaj.ca/lookup/doi/10.1503/cmaj.160134)

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