Biosimilars – What you need to know

What are biologics?

- Biologics are medications that are made from living cells, like animal cells, bacteria or yeast.
- Biologics can be used to treat rheumatoid arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease, psoriasis, anemia, low white blood cell counts, and some cancers.

What are biosimilars?

- A biosimilar is a medication that is made to be as close as possible to a reference biologic medication.
- For example, the biosimilar medication called Grastofil™ is as close as possible to its reference biologic medication Neupogen™. They are both forms of filgrastim.

How are biosimilars different from generic drugs?

- Generic drugs are identical copies of brand name drugs. For example at the pharmacy you can buy ibuprofen as Advil (brand name) or a store brand (generic).
- The active ingredients in the brand name drug and the generic drugs will be exactly the same.
- Biosimilars are different. The active ingredients in a biosimilar medication and a reference medicine will never be exactly the same.
- This is because the living cells used to make biologics will be slightly different in every batch that is made.
- Each new batch of biologic reference medicine and biosimilars must be tested and approved by Health Canada. The tests make sure they will work well and that they are safe.

Do biosimilars work as well as the biologic reference medicine?

- Mostly they work the same but there may be tiny differences between the biosimilar and the reference medicine.
- The biosimilars are tested to make sure they are safe and that they will work well.

Why are biosimilars used?

- When more choices for medication are available then more patients may get access to the medicines that they need.
- Biosimilars may also help to lower drug costs for both patients and the healthcare system.