



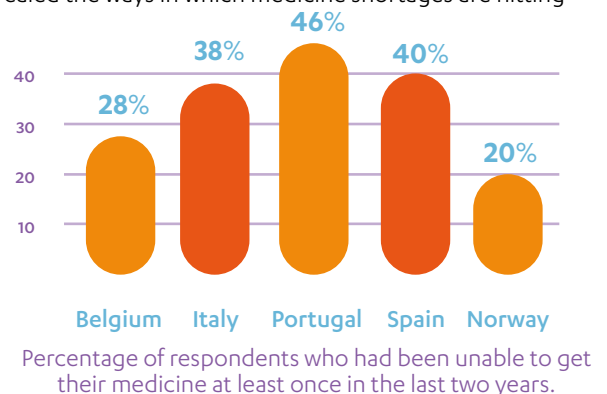
FACTSHEET

Medicine shortages in EU: alarming survey results from some countries

People increasingly experience problems in getting the medicines they need because of shortages. Between 2000 and 2018 for example, notifications of shortages in France have **shot up 20-fold**,¹ while in Spain, they have **multiplied by 12** in a decade.² These shortages can have a devastating effect on consumers' health and their quality of life. Surveys carried out by consumer groups in 2019 and 2020 in a number of European countries³ have revealed the ways in which medicine shortages are hitting consumers. Here is what we learnt.

Huge numbers of people are affected

Medicine shortages are common across the countries surveyed. There are more and more medicines which are in short supply. In 2019, Norway's national shortage list had **1,200** medicines on it, which is double the number on the list in 2018.

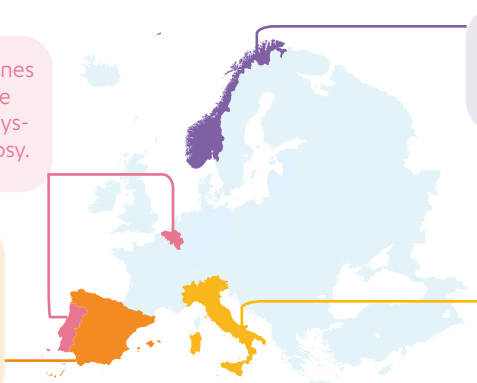


A medicine shortage often has implications for a person's health

Between a third and half of the consumers unable to get the medicine they needed said the shortage had an impact on their health. For many of those people, the medicine shortage caused anxiety, as in **54%** of cases in Spain or **47%** of Belgians. But the medicine shortage could also cause a worsening of their symptoms, which in most of the countries⁴ was the case for close to one in three people who experienced some form of health complications. Among those who suffered health complications in Belgium, Spain, Portugal and Italy, almost one in five people was obliged to take sick leave as a result of their medicine shortage.

The medicines involved are usually for important health problems and require a prescription

In around nine in ten cases when there was a shortage, the medicine was prescribed, which indicates the medicines were deemed essential or even life-saving. The four types of medicines most frequently affected by shortages were almost always the same: those treating problems linked to the **nervous system**, to **cardiovascular problems**, to **infections**, and to **respiratory problems**.



In **Belgium** and **Portugal**, the medicines most often in short supply were those treating problems with the nervous system like depression, anxiety or epilepsy.

In **Spain** the shortages most likely were for treating cardiovascular problems and those against infections, such as antibiotics or antivirals.

In **Norway**, the medicines where shortages were most common dealt with blood pressure.

In **Italy**, shortages were most common for medicines treating cardiovascular problems and blood disorders, such as hypertension or anti-coagulation.



The shortage led to extra costs in some cases

Although most people did not face extra costs when their medicine was unavailable, a minority of consumers did – between 12% and 14% in Belgium, Italy, Portugal and Spain. A median cost for consumers in the four countries ranged between €5 (Italy) and €12 (Belgium) and was down to a more expensive alternative being available. Strikingly, one in four Norwegians who experienced a shortage **had to travel to a different city or region** to find their medicine, while almost one in twenty went abroad to find it.

There were different reasons for the medicine shortage at the pharmacy, and consumers sometimes waited a long time to get their prescribed medicine

In four countries surveyed, **high demand** of the medicine was frequently given as an explanation at the pharmacy for the shortage (in 26% of cases in Belgium or 41% in Portugal), as were logistical and production problems. Other reasons mentioned by pharmacists were a shortage of the active substance, commercial reasons and market withdrawal of the product. More strikingly, consumers were often not given a specific reason for the shortage, which creates uncertainty about how long the shortage could last.

Consumers were often evenly split between waiting for the medicine (27% in Belgium, 30% in Portugal) or accepting a generic version or a drug with another active ingredient. For those who waited, the wait frequently **lasted more than three days** (for 60% of cases in Belgium, 21% in Italy and 31% in Spain). In Norway, more than seven in ten people who chose or had to wait for the medicine to become available waited **a week or longer** before being able to buy the medicine, with almost four in ten people waiting more than a month.

In some cases, people had to go back to the doctor to get a prescription for a different drug. This happened in 19% of cases in Italy and 16% in Belgium. This might have led to additional costs in some countries for consumers.

BEUC RECOMMENDATIONS:

EU and national authorities must take critical action :

- **BETTER PREVENTION AND MONITORING:** Member State authorities should require pharmaceutical companies to submit drug shortage prevention plans. This will help identify risks and promote mitigation measures.
- **STRENGTHENING SANCTIONS, AND APPLYING THEM:** Member States should ensure that there are dissuasive sanctions for when companies do not comply with their legal obligation to ensure appropriate and continued supplies of the product.
- **ENABLE CONSUMER REPORTING:** It should be possible and easy for consumers to report shortages to competent authorities, so there is better understanding of the health and societal impact and improved drug shortage management.

¹ French Health Ministry press release, '[Lutter contre les pénuries et améliorer la disponibilité des médicaments en France](#)' (8 July 2019).

² OCU press release, '[OCU alerta del desabastecimiento de medicamentos](#)' (13 Feb 2020).

³ The surveys took place in Belgium (Test Achats/Test Aankoop), Italy (Altroconsumo), Portugal (DECO), Spain (OCU) and Norway (Forbrukerrådet). The methodology for the survey in Norway differed from the methodology in the four other countries. In the first four countries, a single survey asked consumers if, in the past two years, someone in their household had been unable to get a medicine they needed within the next 24 hours. The Norwegian survey asked similar questions but split over two different surveys.

⁴ Belgium, Italy, Spain, Portugal.