

OUT OF STOCK!

**Not available when you
need it the most: the case of
drug shortages**



N° 1 consumer priority: access to affordable medicines

Consumers have one clear request for the incoming MEP's and new European Commission: give us access to affordable medicines. This ranked first of the consumer priorities polled in [Euroconsumers Election Survey](#). For good reason.

What is the level of priority the EU should give each of the following topics in the next 5 years?



While the 'affordability' part of it is indeed a huge concern, consumers' call is about more than that. It's equally about having the mere 'access' to medicines at times when they are needed. The fact consumers put access to affordable medicines on top of their wish list appears to be rooted in some first-hand experiences, as the new Euroconsumers' survey on drug shortages unravels.

Shortages of medicines are a growing public health threat, affecting consumers' lives in more than one way. Dive into consumers' first-hand experience with shortages of medicines in Belgium, Italy, Spain and Portugal, get to know how big the problem really is and how it is impacting consumers every day.

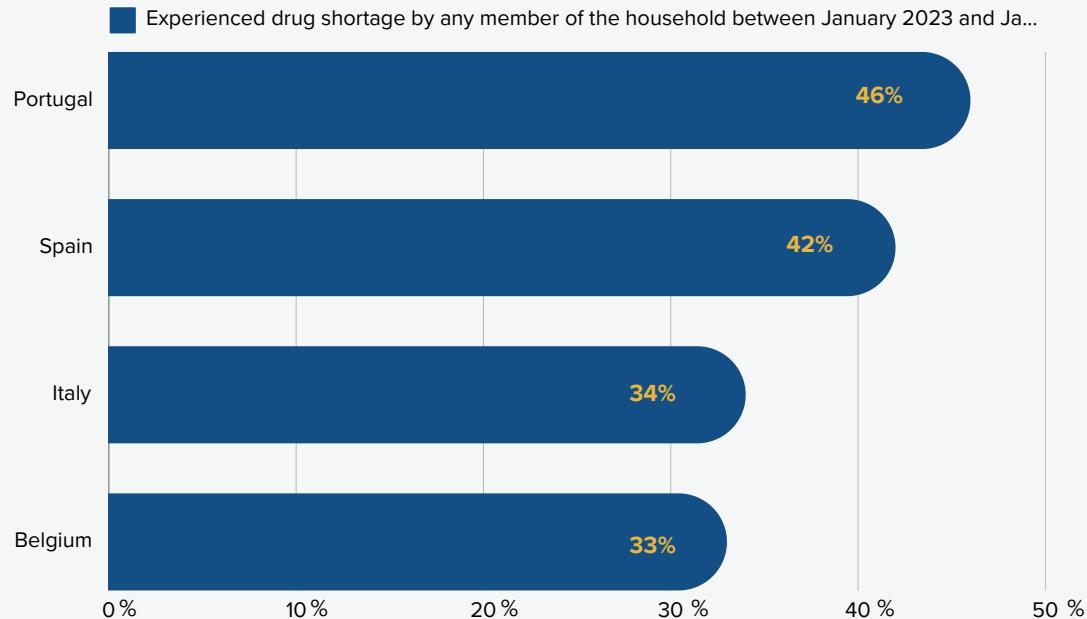


*For the context of this study, we describe a drug shortage as where a person has gone to a pharmacy or hospital to access medicine only to be told it wouldn't be available in less than 24 hours due to a lack of stock or a shortage.

What's going on?

Getting a 'no' on your request to access medicines is not rare and is not a one-time thing.

Our survey found that almost **40%** of respondents had experienced a drug shortage between January 2023 and January 2024.



Prescription: yes. Access: no.

Most consumer experiences with drug shortages are related to prescription medications. This makes it even more worrisome, as these medicines are picked based on the unique context of each specific patient.



On top of this, **80%** of shortages involved drugs dispensed by a conventional pharmacy.

The drug that was not available was ...?

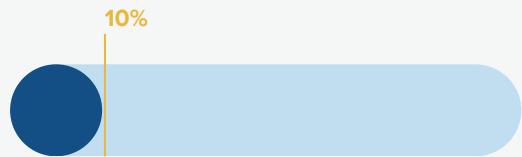
A prescribed drug to be dispensed
in a conventional pharmacy



A prescribed drug to be
dispensed / administered in a
hospital

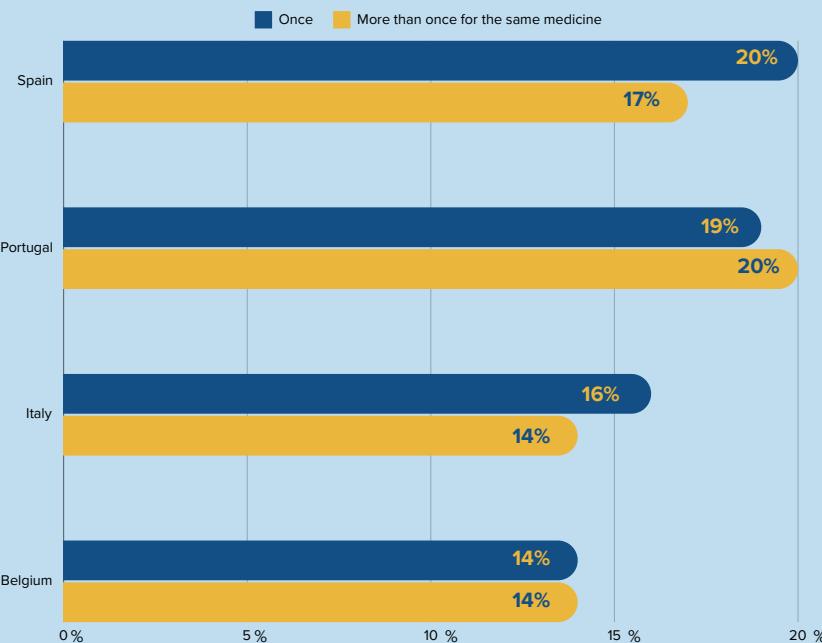


A non-prescription drug / OTC
medicine

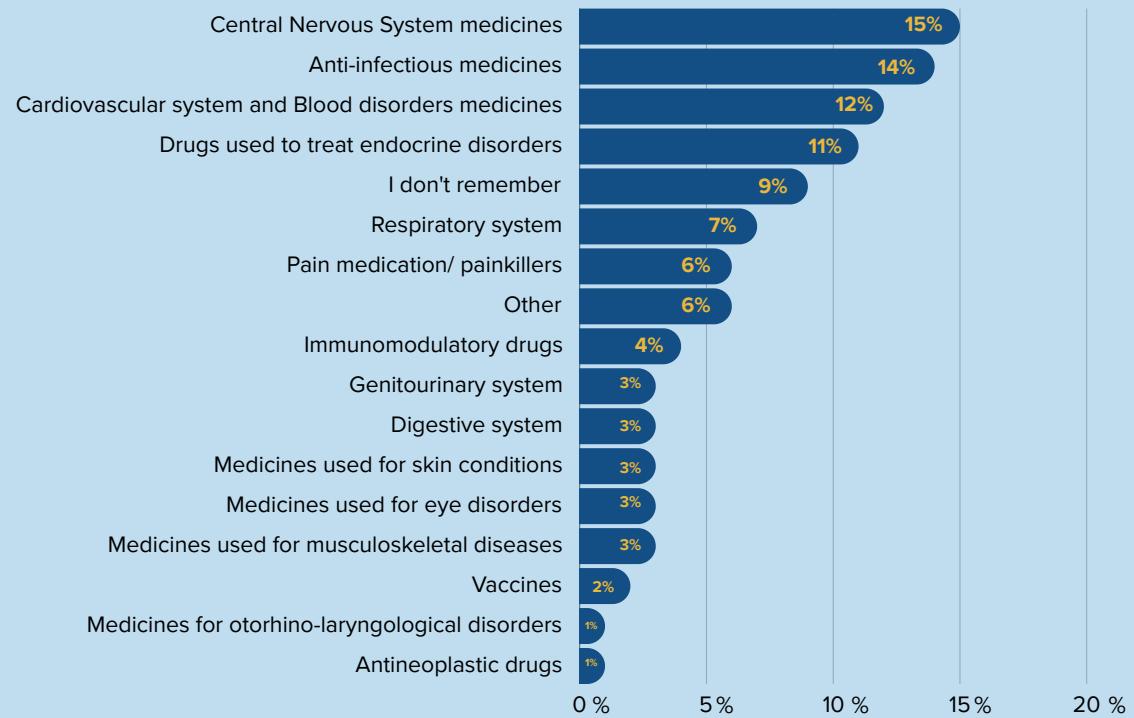


The Most Wanted List

Drug shortages are not a rare occurrence. **16%** even experienced a reoccurring shortage when trying to access the same medicine.



According to respondents, the most commonly unavailable drugs were:

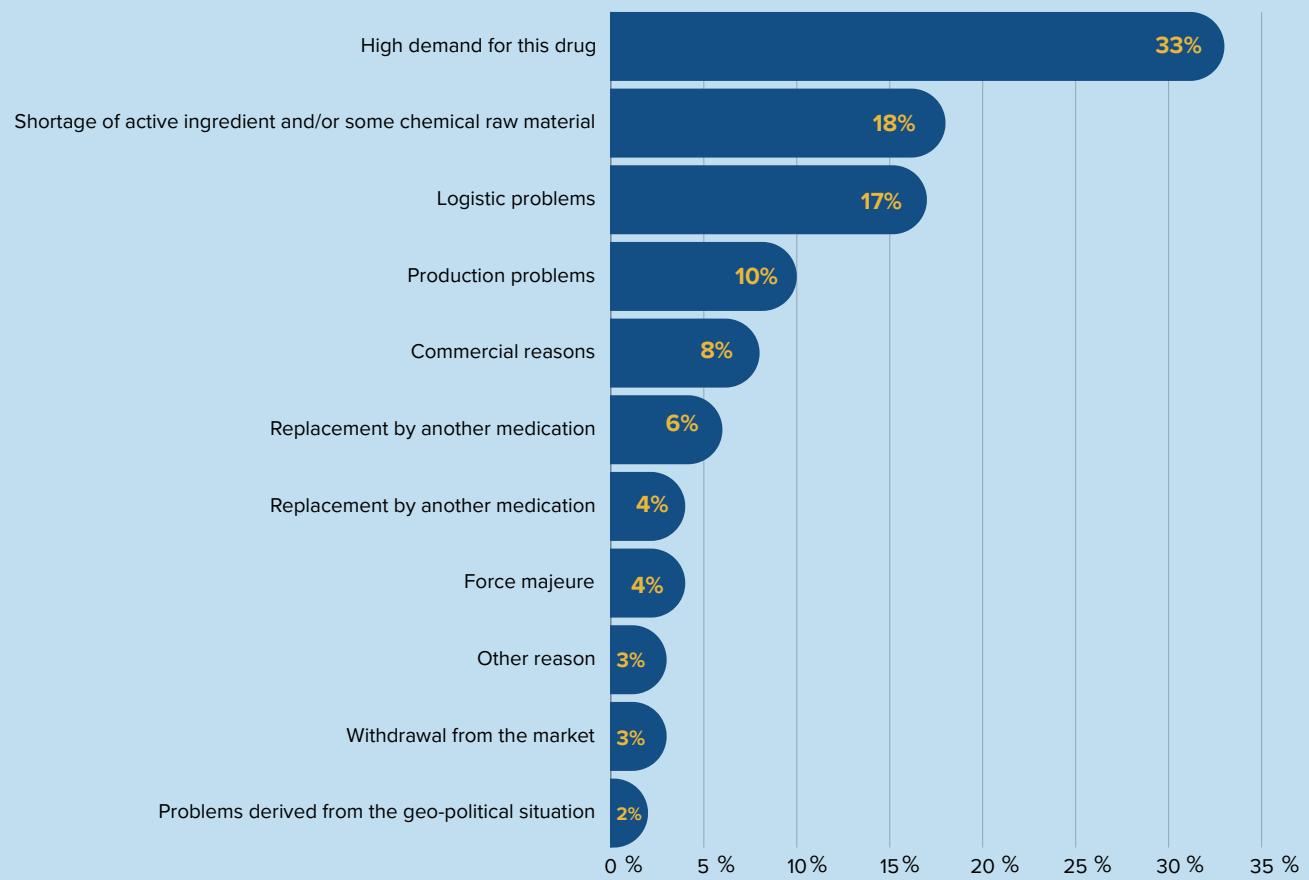


However, this varies depending on where you are. In Belgium the most commonly out of stock medication was **Central Nervous System medicines (19%)**, while in Italy you are more likely to struggle to access your **painkillers (13%)**.

Why Oh Why?

When facing a drug shortage **1 in 3 European consumers** were told this was a result of high demand for the drug. This figure even goes up to **44% of consumers in Portugal**.

However, at the same time almost a quarter of all respondents are kept in the dark about the reason for the shortage. This was **particularly evident in Italy where 27% of consumers did not know why they could not access their medication.**



Now what?

When faced with this problem most consumers were left with three options:



Option 1 Wait it out

- **42%** waited for the drug to be in stock in the same pharmacy
- For **57%** of those respondents, this took 24-72 hours
- For almost **1 in 4 people (23%)** who waited for the drug to be in stock in the same pharmacy it took 4-7 days.



Option 2 Same pharmacy, different drug

- The most common plan B was to get another drug, with the same active ingredient in the same pharmacy.
- In Belgium and Portugal **1 in 5** opted for this approach, compared to almost **1 in 6** in Italy and **1 in 8** in Spain.



Option 3 Start over again

- **16%** of consumers in Spain and Belgium ended up getting a new prescription for a different drug to combat the shortage.
- This meant altering their agreed medical care plan to account for the unavailability of the initial medication, which is both stressful and time consuming for the patient.

The cost of waiting, part I: shortage affects health

Drug shortages are not a fait divers. They come with consequences, they come with a concrete impact on consumers' health and state of mind.

53% of respondents experienced additional costs as a result of the drug shortage. Amongst them:

- **40%** reported worsening of symptoms
- 13%** needed to take temporary sick leave
- 12%** had side effects of the new/substitute medication.

*multiple choice question



Moreover, **50%** expresses worries or even anxiety for not being able to access their medicines

The longer the wait, the bigger the impact:

- **27%** of those who waited more than 24 hours for the medication reported some impact on their health. 10% reported a big impact on their health.
- **32%** of those who waited more than 4 days or more for the medication reported some impact on their health; 15% reported a big impact on their health.

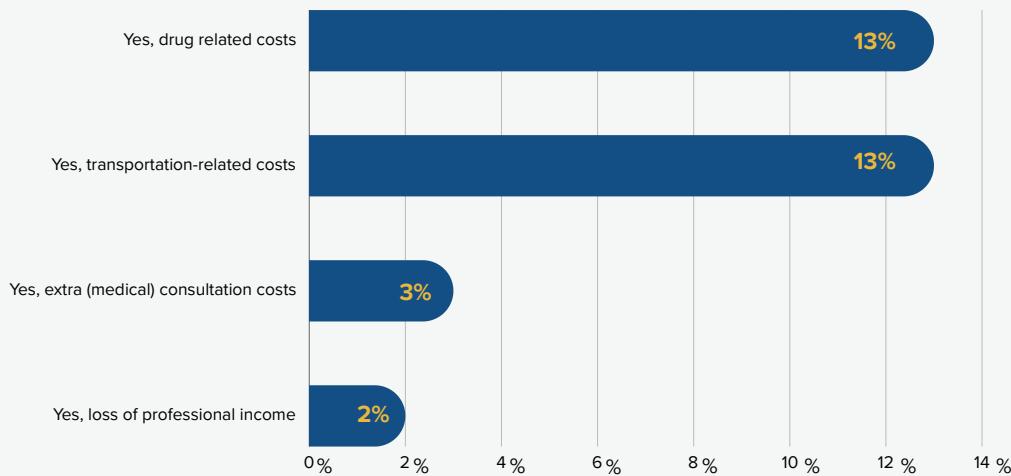


But the effects are not limited to the person's health alone. **40%** of respondents experience at least some impact on their overall quality of life as a result of the shortage, while **16%** experienced a big impact underscoring that this cannot be only understood in a singular context.

The cost of waiting, part II: shortage costs money

Does shortage come at an extra cost? In many cases, yes. At a time when consumers are already worrying about the cost of healthcare, they are also paying the price for drug shortages.

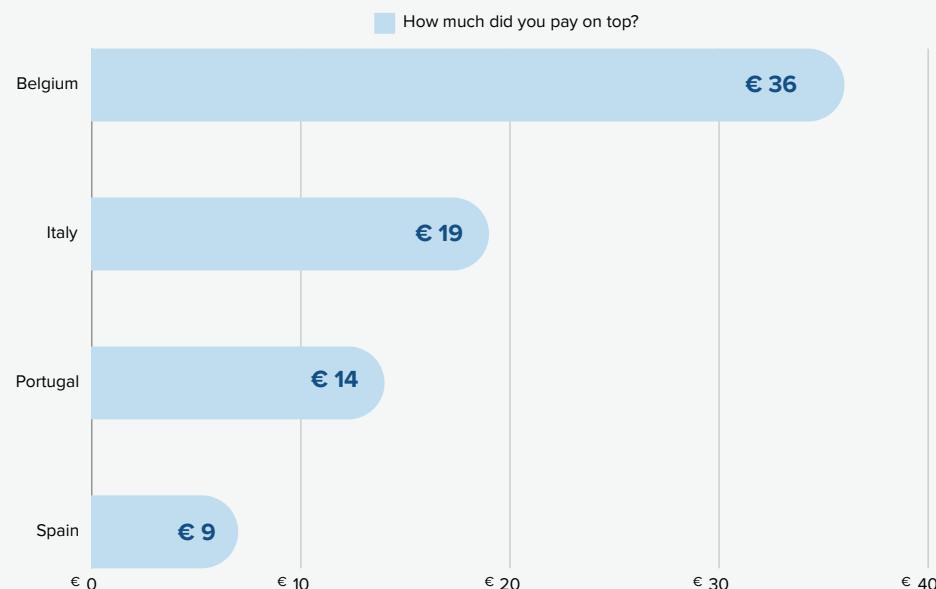
27% of all those surveyed experienced additional costs because of the supply issues.



*Multiple choice question



- On average, consumers had to pay an additional **€19** to access replacement medicine. However, there are marked differences between the countries, with Belgian consumers paying on average an additional **€36** compared to an additional **€7** in Spain.
- In some cases, the bill could run up as high as **€400**.



What consumers think, want and need

One thing is clear, consumers don't think they should pay the price for drug shortages, with **91%** of respondents agreeing they should not face increased costs for supply issues.

68% of respondents say they would like to be able to report drug shortages to relevant authorities.

69% of consumers believe that the pharma industry is more focused on making profit than on patient needs when it comes to drug supply. In Portugal and Spain, this figure rises to **75%** and **71%** respectively.

1 in 3 respondents feel that their national authorities aren't doing enough to assure adequate drugs supply on the market. This feeling is particularly strong in Belgium with **42%** respondents expecting more from their authorities.



So, what now?

Together with BEUC, Euroconsumers' organisations have listed some concrete actions:

- Prevention plans:** to strengthen supply chains, pharmaceutical companies should develop shortage prevention plans for all medicines.
- Safety stocks:** to mitigate the impact on consumers of any supply disruption, companies should keep a minimum two-month safety stock for critical medicines.
- Early notice:** to facilitate effective policy response, manufacturers should notify the authorities of any foreseen shortage six months in advance or, where justified, as soon as they become aware of it. The withdrawal of a product for commercial reasons should be notified 12 months in advance.
- User-friendly communication:** to keep consumers informed, national databases on medicine shortages should report on the cause of the disruption, its expected duration, and on mitigation measures. In addition, competent authorities should enable direct consumer reporting of shortages.
- Dissuasive penalties:** companies that do not meet their supply-related obligations should face penalties that are dissuasive and harmonised across countries.



The ongoing revision of the EU pharmaceutical legislation brings a unique opportunity to introduce these measures across the EU. For more information read BEUC's position paper [here](#)

Methodology

The survey has been conducted in parallel in Belgium, Italy, and Portugal during February 2024 (13th – 22d Feb.). The Fieldwork in Spain was conducted during April 2024 (16th – 19th). Data were collected through an online self-administered questionnaire. 4017 consumers aged between 25 and 74 years were surveyed across Belgium, Spain, Italy and Portugal. The sample was a-priori stratified and a posteriori weighted in order to be representative of the national population in each country regarding age, gender, region and educational level

About Euroconsumers

Gathering five national consumer organisations and giving voice to a total of more than 1,5 million people in Italy, Belgium, Spain, Portugal and Brazil, Euroconsumers is the world's leading consumer cluster in innovative information, personalised services and the defence of consumer rights. Our European member organisations are part of the umbrella network of BEUC, the European Consumer Organisation. Together we advocate for EU policies that benefit consumers in their daily lives.