

Research Advocacy Network

Advancing Patient-Focused Research

The Drug Naming Process

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Keeping track of drugs can be confusing because drugs have at least three and sometimes four names

All drugs have a chemical, a generic and a brand name.

- **Chemical name:** This is the name given when a new chemical entity is developed. It is based on the compound's chemical structure and is usually long and difficult to pronounce. Most drug companies use a code to refer to the drug, such as IMC-C225.
- **Generic name:** When a cancer drug is filed as an IND (Investigational New Drug) with the FDA, it is given its generic name. The United States Adopted Names (USAN) Council, which is made up of the American Medical Association (AMA), the United States Pharmacopeial Convention (USP), and the American Pharmaceutical Association (APhA) give this name. A liaison for the FDA is also on the Council. The World Health Organization (WHO) must also approve the generic name. The stem of a generic name identifies the class of drugs to which the drug belongs. The stem *-mab* indicates a monoclonal antibody such as cetuximab or trastuzumab.
- **Brand or Trade name:** Brand names are created by the company that holds the patent on the new drug in conjunction with the USAN. The FDA must approve all brand names. If the USAN rejects a name submitted by a company, it may suggest another name. If the FDA rejects a name, the company must produce another for consideration. The USAN and the FDA provide companies with guidelines for what they should not do. For example, they discourage the use of stems. The choice of a brand name is primarily driven by marketing considerations. Trade names such as Erbitux and Herceptin are easier to pronounce and to remember.

If basic researchers are referring to a drug, they most often use the chemical or code name. The protocol for clinical researchers is to use the generic names. However, generic names are often difficult to pronounce and advocates and patients often use the brand name. The drug IMC-C225 used in the treatment of colon cancer is also known as cetuximab and Erbitux.

Below are four websites that provide information about drugs and that can be searched by generic or brand name.

List of Approved Oncology Drugs; from the FDA
<http://www.fda.gov/cder/cancer/approved.htm>

Medline Plus, Drug Information
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginformation.html>

BC (British Columbia) Cancer Agency
<http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/HPI/DrugDatabase/DrugIndexPt/default.htm>

People Living with Cancer, an ASCO Website
http://www.plwc.org/plwc/FSCConstructor/0,1739,02-00home-00_12-001113-00_14-00Drug%20Database-00_17-001029-00_21-008,00.html

References:

American Medical Association Website, United States Adopted Names
<http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/2956.html>

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http://www.annals.org/cgi/content/full/129/8/677?maxtoshow=&HITS=10&hits=10&RESULTFORMAT=&fulltext=drug+naming+process&searchid=1077145232059_7996&stored_search=&FIRSTINDEX=0&journalcode=annintmed

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<http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/414871>