

Helpful Tips for Managing the Cost of Your Medications

Basic Medication Facts:

1. Of the thousands of medications available in the United States, some are available under both a brand name (for example, Motrin) and under a generic name (ibuprofen);
2. Medications generally become available as a generic after their patent has expired;
3. Generics are usually much less expensive than the brand name medication; but there are exceptions;
4. Most generics are equal (or equivalent) in strength to their brand name counterpart; but there are exceptions.
5. Many medications have “me too” competitors which can often be interchanged by your doctor with the original medication. These medications are grouped in classes according to how they work. And surprisingly, these “me too” medications may be less expensive than the original, especially if they are available as a generic.
6. Some medications are priced the same regardless of the strength of the pill. In some cases your doctor may recommend buying a double strength tablet for you to break in half, thereby cutting the cost in half.
7. Most extended release or sustained release medications cost more than their short acting versions, so you may pay more to take a pill once a day rather than multiple times a day. Sustained release medications should NOT be broken.
8. Generics are not available as samples in your doctor’s office. If you are given samples of a medication, realize that there will not be a generic of that medication when you go to the pharmacy with a prescription. You may want to ask your doctor about a generic equivalent as an alternative.
9. The price of a medication may vary considerably from pharmacy to pharmacy. For example, many generics are now available at Wal-Mart and Target for only \$4.00.
- 10. You should thoroughly discuss with your physician any changes in your medications before proceeding! And be sure to tell your doctor of any supplements, herbal remedies or homeopathic medications you are currently taking.**

Beyond the Basics

ANTIHYPERTENSIVE (HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE) MEDICATIONS

These medications are divided into different classes. Each class works differently. Your doctor may choose to combine medications from different classes to help lower your blood pressure. Most classes contain at least one generic medication, which is usually the least expensive. The classes and some of the generic medications in the class are as follows:

Diuretics- hydrochlorothiazide, furosemide

Angiotensin Converting Enzyme Inhibitors (ACE)- lisinopril, quinopril, benazapril

Beta Blockers- atenolol, metoprolol, nadolol

Calcium channel blockers- verapamil

Angiotensin Receptor Blockers- no generic available. However, in many cases an ACE (see above) will work as well. The main difference is that about 1 in 6 patients on an ACE will develop a harmless but aggravating cough.

ANTIBIOTICS

Fortunately, many of the most popular and effective antibiotics are in generic forms. Brand named medications such as Augmentin, Ciprofloxacin and Zithromax are all available as generics. Not all infections can be safely treated with generics due to the development of antibiotic resistance. But check with your doctor to see if one is available.

ANTIDEPRESSANTS

Some of the most popular antidepressants and the most effective are now available as generics: Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil, Celexa, and Wellbutrin. Of the group, generic Prozac is by far the least expensive. In addition, generic Celexa can often be substituted for its more expensive cousin Lexapro, with even greater savings if the double strength Celexa is broken in half. Soon Effexor will also be available as a generic.

ARTHRITIS MEDICATIONS

Most of the basic medications in this class such as Motrin are now available as inexpensive generics. The exception is Celebrex which is expensive. Celebrex is no more effective for arthritis than the generics, but it is less likely to cause bleeding ulcers. However, combining generic naproxen with over the counter Prilosec is just as safe, and less expensive.

DIABETIC MEDICATIONS

These medications can also be divided into classes. Often your doctor will treat your diabetes by using medications from different classes combined for the best effect.

Sulfonoureas- there are multiple generics in this class including glipizide and glyburide.

Metformin (Glucophage)- is in a class by itself.

Glitizones- Actos and Avandia are both expensive with no available generics.

Byetta and Januvia- both are new, exciting and expensive medications with no generics available.

Insulin

There are many combination products which make taking your medications easier but are more expensive than taking the medications separately. Usually one of the medications included in the combination is available as a generic.

Often diabetic patients are put in the difficult position of choosing insulin injections over pills to save money. New, potentially more effective medications may be avoided because of the cost. However, at this time, there is no clear evidence that any medication is superior to the others in the treatment of diabetes.

CHOLESTEROL LOWERING MEDICATIONS (THE STATINS)

The group of medications known as the statins has revolutionized the treatment of high cholesterol. Two of these medications are now available as generics: lovastatin (Mevacor) and simvastatin (Zocor). However, these generics remain fairly expensive. The low-cost option is to use a stronger medication such as Crestor, and split the pill in half or in fourths. Thoroughly discuss all medication changes with your physician.

GASTROESOPHOGEAL REFLUX MEDICATIONS

By far the cheapest medication in this class is over the counter Prilosec (Prilosec OTC). It is less expensive than the generic medication (omeprazole), about 1/4th the cost of brand name medications, and 95% as effective. The FDA has placed a warning on this medication instructing patients not to take it for longer than 14 days without consulting a physician. The FDA wants to prevent consumers from self-medicating with the wrong medication. However, if your doctor agrees that this is the correct medication for you, it is safe to take it as long as you need it.

OSTEOPOROSIS

There are no inexpensive alternatives in this class. Boniva, Fosamax, Actonel, Miacalcin and Evista are all expensive.