



Coping With High Drug Costs

More than 40 percent of Americans take at least one prescription, and 17 percent take three or more. Prescription costs will soon exceed physician fees as the second-largest health care cost after being in the hospital.

“Part of this is due to our expectation that there *MUST* be a pill for every condition,” says internist David Caccese, M.D., of Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network. “We forget, until it’s too late, that prevention is the best drug of all.”

“Unfortunately, the patient has no bargaining power with drugs,” Caccese says. “If you want to buy a new car, you can compare prices and features at different dealers, then make a choice based on what seems to be the best value. You can even haggle over the price you’re willing to pay. Not so with prescriptions. Your doctor may not even be aware of how much a certain drug costs, which means he or she can’t advise you on pricing options.”

Caccese and registered pharmacist Jay Needle of Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network offer the following suggestions to help you keep your costs down.

■ At the doctor’s office:

Remember that you’ve hired the doctor to help you. This can be challenging for some older people, who view the physician as the ultimate authority figure. You’re paying the fee, so don’t be afraid to ask for the guidance you need.

Explain your financial situation to the doctor. Ask for less expensive alternatives, such as older or generic versions of the drug. Ask, “Is there any evidence in peer-review journals (as opposed to drug company ads) that this drug works best in a situation like mine or is any better than an older drug?”

Review your medication list with your doctor on a regular basis.

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■ At the pharmacy:

Ask the pharmacist for the generic version of the drug. (In Pennsylvania, pharmacists are required to dispense a generic unless the patient or physician requests otherwise.)

Present your medical insurance card and any other discount drug cards you have when you go to fill your prescription. One plan might offer a cheaper deal than another.

Ask if the pharmacy has its own discount drug card or a senior citizen discount.

Ask the pharmacist if there are double-dose versions of your medication that you could cut in half. For example, if you're taking a 10-milligram pill, it could be cheaper to buy a 20-milligram version and halve the pills. Per-dose costs are often lower when you buy the stronger version. (NOTE: Timed-release capsules shouldn't be cut in half.)

■ At home:

Take your medications as prescribed. Taking less frequent or smaller doses is a dangerous idea that could make your condition get worse.

Do some research into discount drug cards. Some drug manufacturers offer a free or low-cost card that you can use to buy certain prescriptions at a discount, if you're over 65 and your income is low enough to qualify. If you're between 50 and 65, there are other program-based cards that could help you. These plans charge an annual fee and are offered through AARP (MemberRx Choice) and Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network's Vitality Plus GOLD program (RxAdvantage).

Get involved politically. Call, write or visit your legislators and urge them to address the problem of high drug costs. Drug companies have a powerful lobby, but it's citizens like you who have the power to vote.

Reduce your need for prescriptions in the future by taking care of yourself today. Maintain a healthy weight, get regular exercise, eat your fruits and vegetables. Everything helps.

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