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Beat High Prescription Drug Prices

By Phyllis Staff, Ph.D.

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Anyone who's been to the pharmacy to fill a prescription lately is well aware that prices on prescription drugs have gone through the stratosphere. But there are steps you can take immediately to reduce your expenses in this area. Moreover, there are long-term actions you can take to create an atmosphere in which such high prices cannot flourish. This week and next, we'll discuss these steps.

1. Stay well. You know the drill.

Diet. Eat more live food. The best kind comes from your own yard. You benefit doubly by the nutrition fresh live food provides and the exercise you get caring for your plantings.

Exercise. Walking is great, but you will also benefit from lifting weights.

Stress reduction. Worry is there to alert you to potential harm, but past a certain point, it is self-defeating. Regular meditation will help you keep a tendency to worry and stress out under control.

Do something to help others. Often, changing your focus from internal to external helps reduce your awareness of discomfort. And it's always helpful to be reminded that many other people have a more difficult life than you.

2. Ask your physician about alternative methods to health:

Lifestyle changes. Lifestyle changes may bring about the good effects you seek. Such changes may include changing to a vegetarian or semi-vegetarian diet, increasing the types and frequency of activities and exercise. Add meditation to your daily routine. Get a dental checkup. Gum disease is associated with heart problems.

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Generic substitutes for name-brand prescription drugs. Frequently less expensive generic drugs may be substituted without losing effectiveness.

Alternative medicine. Many Americans, concerned with the high cost of medical care, not just prescriptions drugs, but the medical care industry as a whole, have moved toward a more natural approach, seeking help from acupuncturists, naturopaths, chiropractors, etc. Who knows what might help? Try something new if you're not entirely satisfied with your present treatment. If your physician is totally opposed to alternative medicine, you might consider trying a different physician.

Biomedical Devices. We've had good results with a device called a Plant Growth Stimulator, such good results, in fact, that we have avoided antibiotics for more than ten years. However, we suggest you not use it on your ivy houseplant. Too much of a good thing!

You can learn more about biomedical devices from Wayne Green's website at:

Look under the section entitled "Bioelectrifier." And, no, we're not making a joke here. Something similar has been recently tested at Columbia University's Medical Center with very positive results. Be aware, however, that these devices are not approved by the Federal Drug Administration.

3. Reduce your dependence on medication of all types. – If you, your children, or your elders don't absolutely have to take it, don't. Popping a pill to cure a minor ailment can have serious consequences, including:

Bacteria resistance to antibiotics. Tina goes to her physician for antibiotics every time she gets a cold. The fact that antibiotics don't work on colds doesn't keep her from asking for or her physician from prescribing a course of antibiotics, just to be sure. Meanwhile, Americans are experiencing the effects of drug-resistant bacteria.

Over-medication. It's difficult to know exactly the extent to which Americans, particularly the very young and the very old are being over-medicated, but many believe it to be significant. Lethargy, lack of interest in surroundings, slurred speech, unsteady gait – all can be symptomatic of overmedication. So, watch children and senior citizens for signs that they may be over-medicated.

Your pharmacist can be a great resource in this instance. Find one who likes to talk. Ask questions, and listen to her answers.

If you suspect overmedication, act quickly. One of easiest things you can do in this case is to check with your local pharmacist. He or she, if aware of the various medications an individual is taking, can tell you whether or not overmedication is likely. Your pharmacist is an especially good resource in those instances in which a patient is receiving medications by prescribed by different physicians.

A caveat: We are, by no means, advocating refusing needed medications. We do, however, suggest that close attention to the numbers and types of medications taken can not only reduce the high costs associated with prescription medications but may, in many cases, contribute to a greater level of health. The body has its wisdom and its healing mechanisms. Often, we simply need to get out of the

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way and let them work for us.

Self-medication errors. Especially with easy availability of prescription drugs from foreign pharmacies and so many available over-the-counter medications, it's easy to overdo it. Don't! Just because pills are easily available does not guarantee their safety. And certain combinations of over-the-counter drugs and other substances, such as alcohol, can be deadly.

Drug interactions. Not only do certain drugs create unwanted interactions when combined, others can create unwanted side effects when taken with certain foods. Know what to watch out for by checking out the side effects of all medications.

4. Get prescription drugs free – maybe! Most pharmaceutical companies offer certain expensive drugs free to patients who might not otherwise be able to afford them. The rules for each company vary, so find out which company manufactures the drug you need, then go to their website or call them to see what they require. In general, you may qualify if your income is below a certain level and your physician recommends that you receive drugs from their free drug program. There may be a number of different qualifiers, however, depending on the manufacturer and the specific program, so you must

check each drug and each company individually.

The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers Association of America maintains a list of drug companies and their free drug programs. Check them out at

This helpful file may be downloaded in Adobe

format.

5. Order by mail from the least expensive American pharmacy. Often PHARMOR has the least expensive pricing; AARP, the most expensive pricing. And watch out for shipping and handling costs that can add up quickly, especially for overnight shipping required on products such as Xalatan (a medication for glaucoma). Sometimes, if you buy in quantity, you can avoid shipping and handling charges altogether, so look for these deals.

The best site we've found for comparing prescription prices is pillbot.com. Find them at:

You can search on a specific drug name on this site and find a variety of sizes and quantities from a variety of pharmacies. Try it. We think it's a find!

6. Order from foreign pharmacies – with or without a prescription.

Pharmaceutical companies sell the same prescription drugs in foreign countries that they sell in the US. The difference is the price, typically 30 to 50% lower than prices in the US.

On visits to Canada, we frequently stock up on drugs not available or available at much higher prices in the US. But you don't need to go to Canada or Mexico to take advantage of these savings. Pharmacies

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in these and other countries offer you the option of buying by mail.

You don't necessarily need a prescription to order. Although prescriptions are required in the US, our own government's regulations do not require them for our purchases from foreign pharmacies.

Many foreign pharmacy websites offer price lists for prescription drugs, a handy way to compare prices to those of the US. Among those we have found are:

Don't limit your search to these pharmacy sites; many sites will provide price comparisons.

Things to Keep in Mind

In spite of the fact that US regulations do not require a prescription for drugs, certain foreign pharmacies do require a doctor's recommendation. The fee for that "online consultation" is usually about \$75.00 US, so you may eat up any savings if you deal with pharmacies with this requirement.

Also, pay attention to shipping and handling costs. When you add those to the price of the drugs, you may find costs reach or exceed those of American discount pharmacies. However, you can amortize

those costs to a certain extent by buying the full three-months supply allowed by US government regulations.

Make sure you compare prices before you place your final order. While many drugs are cheaper from foreign pharmacies, not all are. Keep notes of US discount pharmacy prices for comparison.

Some foreign pharmacies sell counterfeit prescription drugs. You'll want to stay away from them. So which are reputable? A number of Internet companies claim to give you a "heads-up" on which pharmacies are trustworthy and which are not. We have not tried any of them, but an investment of \$10-\$25 seems worthwhile to ensure that you actually receive the prescriptions you need rather than imitations that could be harmful. Take a look at these sites:

Again, don't limit yourself to these sites. There are dozens more we have not listed that may be just as good or better.

7. Go across the border for prescription drugs.

Avoid shipping and handling costs by going across the border to buy your prescription drugs. But, don't form a co-op for buying prescription drugs. This violates US government regulations that state that you can buy prescription medications only for your own use and only for a three-month period of use. Violation of these rules could mean that your cheap prescriptions could be confiscated at the border.

Nothing would stop you, however, from taking a mini-vacation with friends to make prescription drug purchases. And, with many prices considerably lower than those in the US, you could take a fun break and still save money.

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Use the same cautionary tactics you would use buying from foreign pharmacies by mail order. Get a recommendation for a reputable pharmacy. Ask around. Your friends may already be going across the border for prescription medications and have a pharmacy they trust.

8. Boycott pharmaceutical companies that advertise heavily.

Recently, certain oil companies announced that they would reduce prices because their oil reserves had been replenished. While this may be true, it is also true that they are aware of and responsive to consumer demands to cut prices or lose revenue. An Internet boycott of Exxon/Mobil may have had the desired effect. Boycotting the products of big pharmaceutical companies can create a similar reduction in prices.

Big pharmaceutical companies claim that US prices remain high in order to cover the costs of the research and development of new drugs. If this is true, how is it that those same companies can afford to sell their goods in foreign markets? Their answer: foreign government price controls set the

maximum price to be charged at a level that covers both their production and their research and development costs. Typically, those prices are only a modest fraction of prices extracted from patients in the United States.

Where does the additional money paid by US consumers go? Would it surprise you to learn that typically only half as much money is spent on research and development as is spent on marketing and advertising? Or that pharmaceutical companies yearly spend \$8,000 to \$13,000 per physician in marketing efforts? And unknown amounts in direct consumer media advertising?

Pharmaceutical companies claim that their stepped-up advertising efforts are in response to consumer demand and that their advertising enhances communications between physicians and their patients. When was the last time you and your physician had a good discussion about the merits of a particular prescription drug?

Such expenditures will stop if, and only if, consumers refuse to support them.

9. Boycott pharmaceutical companies that lobby heavily.

Pharmaceutical companies contribute heavily to campaigns, more to national candidates than state or local, but they do contribute to all candidates that we have researched. So, it's no wonder that the federal government fails to comment on the high prices of prescriptions.

By boycotting the largest offenders, we can send the same message sent to the oil companies: reduce your prices or lose our business. And buying prescription medications from foreign rather than domestic sources is a subtle but effective form of boycott.

Refusing to pay high prices on prescription medications is not the only form that a boycott can take. Pharmaceutical companies or their parent companies manufacture many other products.

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For example, Pfizer, the manufacturer of Aricept, Celebrex, and Glucotrol also produces Bubblicious bubble gum, Certs, Chicklets, and Dentyne. BenGay, Lubriderm, Listerine, Roloids, and Sudafed are also Pfizer products.

Pharmacia, acquired by Monsanto in 2000, produces not only the prescription drugs Celebrex, Xalatan, and Xanax, but also over-the-counter Rogaine and the herbicide "Roundup."

Less expensive generic or house brands are easily available to replace these products. While the same pharmaceutical company may still manufacture the products, the profit margins on house brands are usually quite a bit smaller than those of name-brand products.

10. Become an activist!

Lobby Congress, lobby state legislatures, tell your friends, and involve your local senior centers. Refuse to vote for legislators who accept big lobby gifts and vacation junkets. Writing letters, not emails, to protest the gargantuan sums spent on lobbying may be marginally effective. However, your refusal to vote for legislators who support pharmaceutical interest can be effective, if you let them know why they are losing your vote.

BONUS: Elders in certain nursing homes and assisted living communities pay thousands extra when

prescriptions are blister-packed in individual doses. Storing prescriptions in a plastic box with the patient's name prominently displayed can cut these costs dramatically.

Take Back Your Power

So there you have it – ten ways to reduce your costs for prescription medications. You have in it your power to avoid being victimized by high prices for prescription medications, but only if you take action now. Do it today. Take back your power. Vote with your dollars. Vote with your ballots.

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By Prescription Drug Web Guide

For a long time, Americans who are increasingly facing low supplies and high costs have been heading north to purchase their prescription drugs at stores in Canada. The volume of business is expected to be millions of prescriptions filled every year. And during recent elections, many candidates ran on platforms seeking to legalize the practice that many citizens are engaging in whether it is illegal or not.

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To combat both the election hopefuls and the United States citizens who are currently ignoring the pricy prescription drugs on American shelves, the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America is claiming that many imported drugs are unsafe. There is more evidence to the contrary, however.

Many of the prescription drugs that are available on American pharmacy shelves quite legally, are already manufactured in and shipped from foreign countries. This is counter to the PRMA's assertions that imported drugs are unfit or dangerous. Many industry insiders agree that the association is representing solely the interests of American pharmaceutical companies, who directly benefit from inflated drug prices. Like many other countries, Canada's prescription drugs, like the prescription drugs of every industrialized nation with the exception of the United States, are kept relatively inexpensive due to price controls.

The FDA is in step with the PRMA, although it is similarly vague in assertions that buying prescription drugs in Canada is dangerous. In an interview with Kiplinger's, William Hubbard, the FDA's associate commissioner for policy and learning, stated "We know there are good drugs and bad drugs in Canada, but we can't tell you which ones are which."

The fact is, most Canadian prescription drugs are not FDA approved, however Canadian food and drug standards are comparable to those of the United States', and the argument that Canadian prescription drugs are unsafe, remains fairly unsupported. So far, the stream of American buyers seems to indicate the belief that buying prescription drugs from a reputable Canadian drug store is only dangerous to the large American pharmaceutical companies who have a vested interest in keeping drug prices high.

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