



BRIEF ANALYSIS

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Lower Drug Costs for Seniors

by Devon M. Herrick

Families USA publishes an annual report analyzing prices of the 50 top selling drugs used by seniors. The latest survey claims that these drugs' prices rose about 30 percent over the past five years — or 2.5 times the rise in the consumer price index.

However, seniors can significantly lower their costs for these prescription drugs using prudent shopping techniques highlighted in the recent NCPA study "Shopping for Drugs." In fact, the cost of some drug therapies can be reduced by 75 percent to 90 percent using buying techniques consumers normally use to shop for other goods. [See the Figure.]

Pill Splitting. Patients can often purchase medications in doses double the prescribed amount and split them in half. Often, the pharmacist will split the pills for them. This saves money because many medications are sold for about the same price regardless of the size of the pill. For example, seniors can save an average of 39 percent on about half of the 50 most common drugs they use by pill splitting. Candidates for pill splitting include such cholesterol-lowering drugs as Lipitor, Zocor and Pravachol, and such antidepressants as Paxil, Celexa and Zoloft, among others.

Over-the-Counter Options. Self-medication with over-the-counter drugs (OTC) is the most fre-

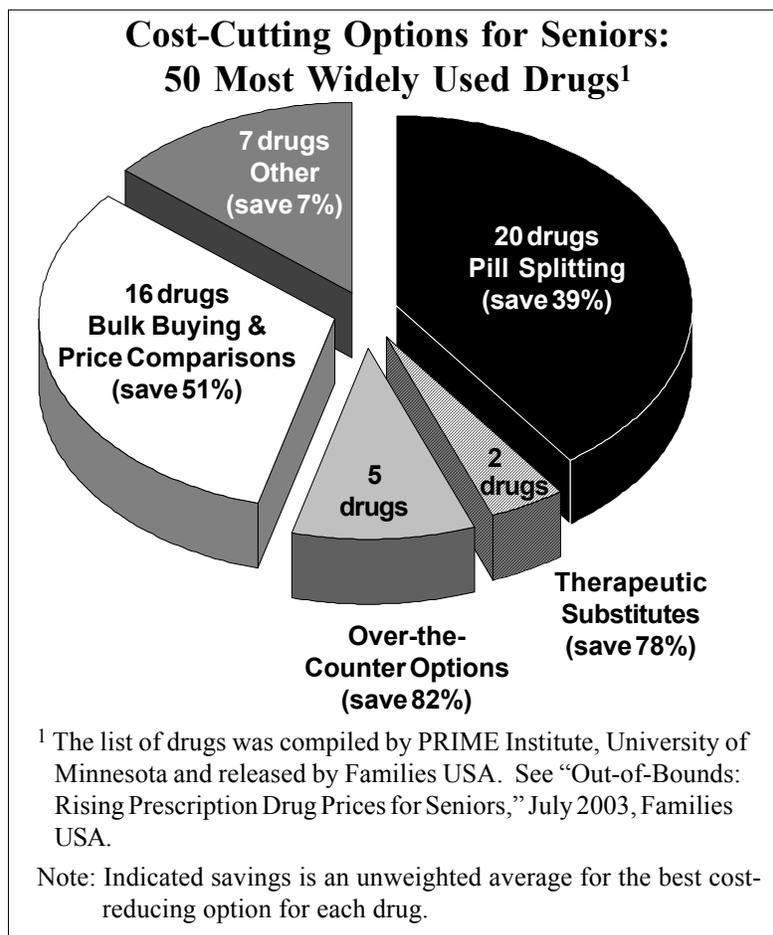
quent way patients treat health conditions. Americans buy more than five billion OTC drug products each year — accounting for 60 percent of drugs used. Today consumers have access to a market with more than 100,000 different OTC drug products. More than 600 OTC drugs were previously available only by prescription. There are OTC options from the same drug class for about five of the 50 drugs most widely used by seniors.

For instance, Claritin (for allergies) is the 48th most commonly used drug by seniors. It costs about \$283 per 100 tablets if purchased by prescription, but only \$28.23 per 100 tablets if purchased OTC at Wal-Mart — a savings of 90 percent.

The fifth most commonly used drug among seniors, Prilosec, is a proton pump inhibitor (PPI) used for serious cases of heartburn; three other PPIs (Prevacid, Protonix and Nexium) also made the list of top 50 drugs. Prilosec will be available OTC beginning September 2003, and the Internet pharmacy Drugstore.com is taking advance orders at \$29.99 for a box of 42 tablets — allowing seniors to save about 80 percent.

Shopping for the Best Deal. Seniors

can frequently save by comparing prices on the Internet. Moreover, purchasing larger sizes can often reduce the average price. By combining these techniques for branded medications, shoppers can save an average of 12 percent. For generics, the average savings is 52 percent. For example:



- Some Internet pharmacies sell many generic drugs used for heart problems — including potassium chloride, diuretics, vasodialators and beta blockers — for only a few dollars more in large quantities (100 to 200 tablets) than in smaller quantities of, say, 30.
- Buying larger quantities can save an average of about 51 percent on about one-third of the 50 most common drugs.

Therapeutic Substitutes. Many drugs have therapeutic substitutes that are far cheaper. These may be generic equivalents or other drugs from the same class. Although there are many examples of therapeutic substitutes, two of the top 50 drugs are especially good candidates for substitution:

- Seniors opting for generic Metoprolol tartrate (50mg) in quantity instead of Toprol XL would save 81 percent.
- Similarly, seniors with diabetes buying generic Glipizide instead of Glucotrol XL would save about 74 percent.

Not all therapeutic substitutes will work equally well for all people. But in many cases, a physician can help find a drug that works well for less money.

Other Options. The drug Celebrex is part a new generation of “super-aspirins” — called COX-2 Inhibitors — that are increasingly popular with seniors. They are popular because they relieve pain and inflammation without the stomach irritation sometimes experienced by taking daily doses of aspirin, ibuprofen or naproxen. Unfortunately, they are rather expensive — costing about \$2.35 per tablet or capsule.

However, there are other pain relievers besides COX-2 Inhibitors without the gastrointestinal irritation of aspirin. Seniors may get relief from such pain relievers as ibuprofen or naproxen tablets, costing 11 cents to 13 cents each, rather than buying Celebrex for 20 times as much. If taken in combination with a common heartburn medication — such as OTC generic Prilosec, Zantac, Pepcid or Tagamet — seniors may find they would get the same effect as taking a

nonstomach-irritating COX-2 inhibitor alone.

This is a case where combining two older pills may be much cheaper than taking one new one.

Drug Assistance Programs. Many states have programs to assist low-income seniors with their drugs costs. In addition, many drug companies have discount card programs for low-income or elderly patients. For example, Together RX, a joint program run by several drug companies, offers savings of up

to 40 percent on more than 150 different drugs. Medicare beneficiaries earning up to \$38,000 per couple qualify. [See the “Checklist for Saving on Drugs.”]

Conclusion. Seniors can realize significant savings on about 43 of the top 50 most often used drugs. Thirty-five of these are higher-priced brand drugs. There are already generic equivalents for some of these drugs and there will be many more within a few years. A few prescription drugs will even become available OTC. [For detailed information on savings, go to <http://www.ncpa.org/pub/ba/ba448/table.html>.]

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Checklist for Saving on Drugs

- ✓ Check state government aid programs at benefitscheckup.com.
- ✓ Check the drug manufacturer discount programs at helpingpatients.org.
- ✓ Compare prices locally.
- ✓ Compare prices over the Internet.
- ✓ If practical, consider splitting pills.
- ✓ Look for a less expensive drug with the same therapeutic benefits.
- ✓ Look for a generic drug.
- ✓ Look for an over-the-counter drug with similar benefits.

Source: Devon Herrick, “Shopping for Drugs,” NCPA Policy Report No. 262, June 2003, National Center for Policy Analysis.

Note: Nothing written here should be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of the National Center for Policy Analysis or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation.

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