

Health Tips

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with

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Health Tip: Stretching medication dollars

Judicious application of three practices - substitution of generic for more expensive trade name drugs, use of over-the-counter (OTC) medications, and splitting pills - can help extend health care dollars spent on medications. Be aware, however, that these strategies will not work for every medication regimen or with all medical conditions.

Generic drugs

Did you know that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has rules in force to ensure that every generic drug contains the same components as its brand-name equivalent? All generic drugs must have the same quality, strength, purity and stability as their counterparts. Generics use the same active ingredients, are shown to act in the same way in the body, and have the same risk-benefit profile as a brand name drug. The difference is the cost. The price of generic drugs average 15 to 60 percent less than their brand name counterparts.



If you are receiving a prescription, you can initiate the process of receiving a generic by asking your doctor if a generic version is available. Unless your doctor has indicated otherwise, your pharmacist may also be able to offer you a generic equivalent, but often, you will have to bring this up yourself.

Use of these less expensive alternatives to brand name medications can have a huge impact on health care costs resulting in lowered insurance premiums for all of us. The use of generic medications has even been endorsed by the American Medical Association, the largest association of doctors in the U.S.

OTC medications

Compared to 30 years ago, there are literally hundreds of OTC products that use ingredients or dosage strengths that were previously available only by prescription. In most cases, OTC medications are just as effective, and cost less than their prescription counterparts. Just a few of these now-available OTC medications include: Omeprazole (Prilosec), one of the best medications

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available for treatment of gastroesophageal reflux, gastritis and peptic ulcer, Lamisil cream - a highly effective topical treatment for athlete's foot and other fungal infections of the skin, and Claritin and Zyrtec, two of the newer non-sedating type of antihistamines.

While the availability of these medications and treatments is good for the consumer, there are certain measures that need to be taken to assure the safe and effective use of these products:

- **Make sure that the treatment fits the ailment.** Although this seems obvious, one of the most important functions of a health care provider is to make an accurate diagnosis before offering treatment. If there is any doubt as to the underlying problem, have the condition confirmed by a physician.
- **Become a label reader.** Make sure you know what ingredients the product contains and understand any warnings or possible adverse effects. OTC medications, just like prescription ones, can cause adverse reactions.
- **Consult with your doctor.** Adverse interactions can sometimes occur when an OTC medication is taken along with a prescription medication. If you are taking any prescription medications, be sure to ask your doctor before starting an OTC medication

Splitting pills

While only some types of pills can be split safely, the practice could slice a significant amount off of America's prescription drug costs. The idea behind pill-splitting is that most medicines contain different doses of the active ingredient,



but their cost may be same. If, for example, someone's dosage of a cholesterol-lowering medication is 50 mg, splitting a 100 mg tablet could get them two doses for the price of one!

As with OTC medications, it is essential to ask your doctor or pharmacist whether your medication can be split safely. With certain medications such as blood thinners or seizure medication, splitting pills is not recommended. If pills are split unevenly, someone could receive too much or too little in a given

dosage. Other medications that shouldn't be split are:

- Extended-release pills
- Pills containing more than one medication
- Enteric coated pills that protect the stomach from irritation
- Irregularly shaped pills
- Capsules

Many of the medications used to treat hypertension (Norvasc, Cozaar, Prinivil), high cholesterol (Crestor, Lipitor, Pravachol), and depression (Paxil, Zoloft) are appropriate for splitting. Some pills are scored which means that they have received approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for splitting. If

the pill is not scored, it is best to use an inexpensive pill splitter that can be purchased at most pharmacies.

In each instance, with use of generics or OTC medications and with splitting pills, it is best to make sure that your doctor is aware of these practices and supports their use.

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