

Same generic drug, many prices

We found big price differences at drug stores on the generic versions of Lipitor, Plavix, and other common drugs

Consumer Reports magazine: May 2013

If your insurance has ever stopped covering a prescription drug, or you don't have coverage at all, you know how quickly costs can mount. Americans spent on average \$758 out of pocket for medication in 2012, according to a recent Consumer Reports national telephone poll. And in our survey of 1,130 people who regularly took prescription drugs—the insured and uninsured—12 percent spent more than \$1,200 last year. Our advice if you're looking to reduce out-of-pocket drug costs: Shop around.



Our secret shoppers called more than 200 pharmacies throughout the U.S. to get prices on a month's supply of five blockbuster drugs that have recently become available as generics: **Actos** (pioglitazone), for diabetes; **Lexapro** (escitalopram), an antidepressant; **Lipitor** (atorvastatin), for high cholesterol; **Plavix** (clopidogrel), a blood thinner; and **Singulair** (montelukast), for asthma. The result? A whopping difference of \$749, or 447 percent, between the highest- and lowest-priced stores.

Costco was the least expensive overall, and you don't need to be a member to use its pharmacy. A few independent pharmacies came in even cheaper, though their prices varied widely, as did grocery-store pharmacies. The online retailers Healthwarehouse.com and FamilyMeds.com also had very low prices. On the other end of the spectrum, CVS, Rite Aid, and Target had the highest retail prices. The full results of the study appear in the chart below.

A representative of CVS told us that its retail drug prices reflect other services offered by the chain, including drive-through windows, automated prescription refill systems, free outreach programs to help make sure patients are taking their prescriptions correctly, and 24-hour pharmacies. Costco pharmacies, the cheapest overall, are open only from 10 a.m. to 7 or 8:30 p.m. and are typically closed on Sundays.

"Big-box stores such as Costco and Walmart use the pharmacy as a traffic builder for their stores, whereas traditional chain stores, such as CVS, Rite Aid, and Walgreens, make the majority of their revenue and profits from the pharmacy," says Stephen W. Schondelmeyer, Ph.D., Pharm.D., a professor of pharmacy economics at the University of Minnesota.

How to save

Whichever drugstore or pharmacy you use, choosing **generics** over brand-name drugs will save you money. Talk to your doctor, who may be able to prescribe lower-cost alternatives in the same class of drug. In addition, follow these tips.

Request the lowest price. Our analysis showed that shoppers didn't always receive the lowest available price when they called the pharmacy. Sometimes they were given a discounted price, and other times they were quoted the list price. Be sure to explain—whether you have insurance or not—that you want the lowest possible price. Our shoppers found that student and senior discounts may also apply, but again, you have to ask.

Leave the city. Grocery-store pharmacies and independent drugstores sometimes charge higher prices in urban areas than in rural areas. For example, our shoppers found that for a 30-day supply of generic **Actos**, an independent pharmacy in the city of Raleigh, N.C., charged \$203. A store in a rural area of the state sold it for \$37.

Get a refill for 90 days, not 30 days. Most pharmacies offer discounts on a three-month supply.

Consider paying retail. At Costco, the drugstore websites, and a few independents, the retail prices were lower for certain drugs than many insurance copays.

Look for additional discounts. All chain and big-box drugstores offer discount generic-drug programs, with some selling hundreds of generic drugs for \$4 a month or \$10 for a three-month supply. Other programs require you to join to get the discount. (Restrictions apply and certain programs charge annual fees.)

Although the low costs we found at a few stores could entice you to get your prescriptions filled at multiple pharmacies based only on price, our medical consultants say it's best to use a single pharmacy. That keeps all of the drugs you take in one system, which can help you avoid dangerous drug interactions.

How drug costs compare

In our pharmacies study, Costco had the lowest retail prices overall and CVS the highest for five widely prescribed generics.



Drugstore/store	Price ¹					Total
	Generic Actos, 30 mg (pioglitazone)	Generic Lexapro, 20 mg (escitalopram)	Generic Lipitor, 20 mg (atorvastatin)	Generic Plavix, 75 mg (clopidogrel)	Generic Singulair, 10 mg (montelukast)	
Costco ²	\$101	\$7	\$17	\$15	\$27	\$167
Healthwarehouse.com	141	11	16	12	29	209
FamilyMeds.com	140	12	15	30	29	226
Sam's Club ²	140	87	56	48	47	376
Independents ³	180 (\$37-\$393)	52 (\$6-\$164)	42 (\$8-\$197)	48 (\$8-\$222)	58 (\$10-\$193)	381 (\$131-\$1,073)
Kmart	145	96	65	46	40	392
Walmart	160	84	68	58	57	426
Walgreens	158	105	65	50	55	433
Grocery stores ³	252 (\$48-\$346)	115 (\$12-\$190)	84 (\$10-\$146)	99 (\$5-\$209)	108 (\$15-\$173)	658 (\$176-\$1,018)
Target	274	85	144	158	135	796
Rite Aid	286	119	134	137	144	820
CVS	295	126	150	180	165	916

¹ For walk-in stores, average price for one-month supply. ² Nonmember, nondiscounted prices. At Sam's Club, prices could be up to 40 percent less.

³ Prices in parentheses are the range across sampled stores.

Editor's Note: These materials were made possible by a grant from the state Attorney General Consumer and Prescriber Education Grant Program, which is funded by a multistate settlement of consumer fraud claims regarding the marketing of the prescription drug Neurontin (gabapentin).

Like

668

Tweet

For complete Ratings and recommendations on appliances, cars & trucks, electronic gear, and much more, **subscribe today** and have access to all of ConsumerReports.org.