



# **How to Save Money on Prescription Medications, Safely – A Consumer Guide**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Edition**

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## ***How to Save Money on Prescription Medications, Safely – A Consumer Guide***

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### **Introduction:**

According to a poll conducted by [Harvard University/Kaiser/USA Today](#), 40% of Americans have trouble paying for medication, skip medications, cut pills, or switch to substitute products, such as OTC products. That poll was taken over two years ago *before* the worst of the recent recession hit, when the U.S. unemployment rate was only 5.2%. At that time, roughly one quarter of Americans faced the burden of paying out-of-pocket to fill prescriptions. That number included 47 million uninsured, 25 million under-insured, and three and a half million Medicare drug plan enrollees who fell each year in the coverage gap. What's more, even people with drug coverage often faced exorbitant co-pays to get the drugs they need. The problem is much worse now with a 9% unemployment rate and over 50 million Americans without health insurance.

Other countries, most notably in the European Union, have taken measures to lower drug prices through policies that include negotiating drug prices, something the U.S. government does not do. In stark contrast to declining foreign prices, as the recession worsened, U.S. drug prices rose over 9% in 2009. The Affordable Healthcare Act, passed in December of 2009, will extend insurance coverage, including drug coverage, to more people – but most of that law's provisions do not take effect until 2014 and its full impact on drug affordability remains unknown.

Fortunately, American consumers can get the same medication at a fraction of the price charged by most local pharmacies if they look at all their options and take the time to shop around.

**This report describes strategies that consumers can and do use to safely lower their drug costs.**

## Free Strategies for All to Use:

### ***Saving on Brand Name Medication***

#### **Check Brand Name Prices at Canadian and Other International Online Pharmacies**

The greatest potential savings on drug costs come from buying brand name medication at significantly lower prices from other countries. While it is technically illegal for Americans to import drugs through the mail, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration rarely interferes (industry experts have reported that an estimate of 99% of imported prescription orders for personal use are received by patients) as long as the supply is for three months or less and doesn't include controlled substances.

The potential savings are enormous, often thousands of dollars a year. We found the potential average savings for top brand name drug products to be 80%. For example, at a typical U.S. pharmacy, the diabetes drug Actos (15mg) costs \$602.99 for a three-month supply (\$2,411.96 annually). At the lowest priced, non-U.S. online pharmacy with verified credentials listed on PharmacyChecker.com, the same dose and supply of Actos costs only \$180 (\$349.20 annually) – an 86% savings. Lipitor (20mg), which costs \$535.99 (\$2143.96 annually) for a three-month supply at a regular U.S. pharmacy, is available for as low as \$85.70 (\$342.80 annually) at a non-U.S. online pharmacy found on PharmacyChecker.com; a savings of 84%. For any American who takes both Actos and Lipitor, annual savings would be \$3,863.92 – 85% – if they shopped at safe international online pharmacies [[See Table 1 Price Chart Below](#)].

#### *Is it safe?*

Like the U.S., Canada as well as Australia, Israel, New Zealand, Switzerland and the UK have very high pharmaceutical and pharmacy standards and regulatory enforcement. Countries such as India and Turkey also have strict laws on drug safety and most pharmaceutical products are of a very high quality and are often made by the same manufacturers of popular prescription drugs sold in the United States. Pharmaceutical standards in some countries, however, may be lower than in the U.S. or not enforced as efficiently. Many international online pharmacies can give you the option of ordering from pharmacies in different countries so you can decide which one meets your comfort level. Descriptions of different pharmaceutical and pharmacy regulations can be found in the [Foreign Pharmacies](#) section on PharmacyChecker.com.

To be safe, Americans should avoid any non-U.S. online pharmacy that has not been verified by an independent third-party, such as [PharmacyChecker.com](#) – which, through its Verification Program,

verifies pharmacy licenses, checks the safety of online pharmacies and inspects international pharmacies. Look for the [PharmacyChecker.com Seal](#) on pharmacy websites and be sure the seal links to a current and valid profile of that online pharmacy; this seal is hosted on PharmacyChecker.com's website. Examples of approved online pharmacies are found at [PharmacyChecker.com - Ratings](#).



**Valid Member**  
12/1/2010

[CLICK ON THE SEAL TO TEST ITS VALIDITY]

**SAFETY WARNING:** Do not buy controlled substances from non-U.S. online pharmacies. Reputable and safe international online pharmacies do not market, sell or ship controlled substances to the United States.

### **Check Brand Name Prices at U.S. Online and Wholesale Club Pharmacies**

If you purchase only from within the U.S., you can still save money on brand name medication because prices at online pharmacies tend to be lower than at bricks and mortar pharmacies due to lower overhead and higher volume. In fact, the same drug at a CVS store may be less expensive if purchased at CVS.com. For example, at a local New York bricks and mortar CVS pharmacy, 90 pills of Lipitor (20mg) cost \$535.99. Online at CVS.com, 90 pills cost \$506.99, a 5.5% savings [[See Table 1 Price Chart Below](#)]. Drugstore.com and U.S. wholesale club pharmacies, like Costco.com, often offer the lowest U.S. prices. You can compare U.S. (and non-U.S.) drug prices on nearly every prescription drug at PharmacyChecker.com - Prices. Again, be sure that an online pharmacy has been verified by a third party, such as [PharmacyChecker.com](#) (U.S. and non-U.S. pharmacies) or Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites ([VIPPS](#)) (U.S. pharmacies only) – a verification service administered by the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy.

**Table 1: Safe Savings on Popular *Brand Name* Drugs**

(Based on 90-Day Supply)

Drug	U.S. Bricks and Mortar Pharmacy Price	Best U.S. Online Pharmacy Price on Pharmacy-Checker.com	U.S. Online Savings	Best International Online Price on Pharmacy-Checker.com	International Online Savings
Lipitor (20 mg) – Cholesterol reducer	\$535.99	\$462.39++	<b>14%</b>	\$85.70	<b>84%</b>
Nexium (40 mg) – Anti-reflux/ulcer	\$621.00	\$565.97	<b>9%</b>	\$54.90*	<b>92%</b>
Plavix (75 mg) – Anti-stroke/MI	\$598.99	\$543.20++	<b>9%</b>	\$141.30*	<b>76%</b>
Singulair (10 mg) – Anti-asthma	\$491.99	\$408.08	<b>17%</b>	\$127.80*	<b>74%</b>
Seroquel (300 mg) – Antipsychotic	\$1,420.99	\$1,286.16	<b>9%</b>	\$379.49	<b>73%</b>
Advair Diskus (250/50mcg, 180 doses) – Anti-asthma	\$826.00	\$694.17	<b>16%</b>	\$134.65	<b>84%</b>
Abilify (10mg) – Antipsychotic	\$1,820.99	\$1,612.31	<b>11%</b>	\$358.20*	<b>80%</b>
Crestor (20mg) – Cholesterol reducer	\$487.00	\$414.95++	<b>15%</b>	\$95.04*	<b>80%</b>
Cymbalta (60mg) – Antidepressant	\$545.00	\$471.88	<b>13%</b>	\$143.00*	<b>74%</b>
Actos (15 mg) – Diabetes control	\$602.99	\$479.86	<b>20%</b>	\$87.30*	<b>86%</b>
<b>Average Savings</b>			<b>13.5%</b>		<b>80%</b>

Sources: PharmacyChecker.com); Bricks and mortar prices at CVS pharmacies located in New York City (Prices collect between December 2010 and February 2011).

+ Calculated from price quoted for 60 pills

\*Calculated from price quoted for 84 pills

++ Calculated from price quoted for 100 pills

## ***Saving on Generic Drugs***

### **Check Discount Generic Programs at Large Retailers and Pharmacies**

In the summer of 2006, Wal-Mart launched a program making many generic drugs available for \$4 for a 30-day supply. [That program, and others that followed](#) from retailers such as Target, Kmart, Kroger, Wegmans, Publix and Safeway, has expanded beyond 30-day supplies to offer 90-day supplies for \$10 to \$12, free 14-day supplies of antibiotics, and flat rate generic prescription pricing. These price options are lower than those at most other pharmacies, and sometimes even lower than co-pays required by some pharmacy benefit plans.

However, there are many generics not covered in these programs. For example, Wal-Mart's \$4 generic program does not include losartan (Cozaar), losartan + HCTZ (Hyzaar), selegiline (Elderpryl), or sertraline (Zoloft). One reason a generic may not be covered is that state laws sometimes [prohibit pharmacies from selling 'below cost'](#). A 2009 article from the National Conference of

State Legislatures reports that Wal-Mart prices 55 of their generic drugs higher than generic program costs because of these state laws. Clinical Pharmacist Dr. Kyle Peters elaborates on other reasons some generics may not be included in these discount programs:

There are four potential issues: 1) supply and demand, 2) reimbursement might be greater for certain generics if they go through insurance, 3) extended release products are more expensive to manufacture (for example, metoprolol succinate – the [most commonly prescribed generic extended release product](#)), and 4) most generics are expensive for six months after they become available due to sales and manufacturing exclusivity rights.

It's important for consumers to know that for those generics not covered in the \$4 programs, there may be better savings available. If the drugs you need are not included in specific generic retail programs, researching online at PharmacyChecker.com, checking Wholesale Club Pharmacies, or investigating drug programs based on need or fees are your best options.

### **Check Wholesale Club Pharmacy Prices**

The generic drug programs discussed above offer great savings on most generic drugs. However, as some generics are not covered, the costs at retail pharmacies can be quite expensive. Consumers may find better savings by comparing prices online and from wholesale pharmacy clubs, such as Costco.com. For example, losartan (the generic of Cozaar, which treats high blood pressure) is not on Wal-Mart's list of \$4 generics. Wal-Mart Pharmacy charges \$172.78 for 90 pills of losartan (50mg) while the price at CostCo.com is just \$19.02 – a savings of 89%. Alendronate (70mg), the generic version of Fosamax, costs \$24 for a three-month supply at Wal-Mart, while CostCo.com's price is only \$17.10. [[See Table 2 Price Chart Below.](#)] Another example of a generic more competitively priced at wholesale clubs is hydrocodone-acetaminophen (generic for the pain medication Vicodin), a controlled substance [**Remember: Never purchase controlled substances (such as Ambien, Ativan, Valium, Vicodin and Xanax) from foreign pharmacies** – the most reputable and trustworthy pharmacies do not sell these products. Moreover, generic controlled drug products are almost always reasonably or lower-priced here at home.]

You can use [PharmacyChecker.com - Prices](#) to quickly compare generic prices across many pharmacies.

**Table 2: Safe Savings on Popular Generic Drugs – (Lowest Price in Bold)**

(Based on 90-Day Supply)

Drug (Condition Treated) – (common brand version) per 90 Pills (Unless Otherwise Specified)	U.S. Bricks and Mortar Pharmacy Price	Best Price from Wal-Mart or Other Generic Program	Best U.S. Price (on Pharmacy-Checker.com)	Maximum Savings
Lisinopril (20 mg) – (hypertension) – Prinivil, Zestril	\$51.00	\$10.00	<b>\$9.85*</b>	<b>81%</b>
Bupropion (150 mg) – (depression) – Wellbutrin, Zyban	\$371.00	<b>\$40.00</b>	\$63.00+	<b>89%</b>
Fluoxetine (20 mg) – (serious depression) – Prozac	\$45.49	\$10.00	<b>\$8.40</b>	<b>82%</b>
Simvastatin (40 mg) – (Cholesterol-reducer) – Zocor	\$193.99	\$9.90	<b>\$9.75*</b>	<b>95%</b>
Levothyroxine (100 mcg) – (Treats thyroid conditions) – Synthroid	\$38.49	\$10.00	<b>\$9.75*</b>	<b>75%</b>
Losartan (50mg, 90 pills) – (high blood pressure) – Cozaar	\$180.00	\$172.78	<b>\$19.02</b>	<b>89%</b>
Sertraline (50mg, 90 pills) – (depression) – Zoloft	\$98.59	\$28.72	<b>\$22.58</b>	<b>77%</b>
Acetaminophen and Hydrocodone (10-325 mg) – (serious pain relief) – Vicodin	\$80.59	\$68.64	<b>\$26.10++</b>	<b>68%</b>
Atenolol (50 mg) – (heart conditions) – Tenormin	\$26.69	\$10.00	<b>\$7.03</b>	<b>74%</b>
Alendronate (70 mg, 12 pills) – (osteoporosis) – Fosamax	\$150.00	\$24.00	<b>\$17.00</b>	<b>89%</b>
<b>Average Savings</b>				<b>82%</b>

Sources: PharmacyChecker.com, Walmart.com and [Walmart.com Prescription Drug Price List PDF](#), price check with Wal-Mart in New Jersey. Bricks and mortar prices at CVS pharmacies located in New York City. Prices collected between December 2010 and February 2011.

+ Calculated from price quoted for 50 pills

\*Calculated from price quoted for 60 pills

++ Calculated from price quoted for 100 pills

## Other Discount Programs

### *Age or condition-based*

**Medicare Part D** – Only Medicare enrollees may participate in Part D Prescription Drug Plans, which, similar to health insurance, require a monthly premium and usually have a deductible. Medicare will pay 75% of drug costs between \$250 and \$2830, and the member must pay the remaining 25%. Drug costs between \$2830 and \$4550 are considered to be in the “gap” or “doughnut hole”, and in 2011 members must pay 50% of brand name drug costs, and 93% of generic drug costs. After the member has reached the \$4550 mark, Medicare will pay 95% of costs, and the member will pay 5%.

[Medicare.gov](https://www.medicare.gov) provides detailed information on all plans, including drug formulary and pricing; [MedicareDrugPlans.com](https://www.MedicareDrugPlans.com) also provides cost information and includes consumer ratings and comments, sorted by company and plan; and [MedicareRights.org](https://www.MedicareRights.org) provides information and advocacy work for Medicare enrollees.

#### *Need-based*

**State Programs** – 40 states offer their residents programs for accessing drugs for free or at a savings based on subsidies or discounts. Some are Medicare wrap-around programs. Websites of the [National Conference of State Legislatures](https://www.nationalconferenceofstatelegislatures.com) and [MedicareRights.org](https://www.MedicareRights.org) provide information and links to applications for these programs.

**Prescription Assistance Programs** – Many large pharmaceutical manufacturers offer free or highly discounted brand name drugs to people with low incomes or with a very high percentage of income spent on prescription drugs. [To access these programs](#), applicants are usually required to disclose their finances by providing a tax statement, provide a prescription from their doctors, and show that they were declined benefits under Medicaid. A listing of programs and information on access and eligibility is available on our blog at [PharmacyCheckerBlog.com](https://www.PharmacyCheckerBlog.com).

#### *Other*

**Discount Cards** – Discount cards generally provide a savings of about 5% to 15% for brand name drug prices and substantially greater discounts on generics at local pharmacies within specific networks; however, greater savings are available by shopping online. A small number of cards provide greater savings, but these are limited to certain income and age groups. Links to some cards are found at <https://www.pparx.org/DiscountCards.php>. Costco also offers a [Member Prescription Program](#) with additional discounts to people who do not have prescription coverage.

### **Conclusion:**

Too many Americans skip doses or stop taking their medication due to cost, but there are many useful strategies available to get drugs at much lower prices. Programs run by government agencies or pharmaceutical companies may be helpful for the few who qualify. For most Americans, however, these programs are not an option or not helpful enough. Freely available tools on the Internet allow consumers to price-shop, safely reducing drug prices by 80%. Ordering from verified online retail pharmacies and wholesale club pharmacies, both in the U.S. and abroad, or from large retail stores with low-cost generic drug programs, are all safe and savvy options.



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