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## How New Generics Can Cut Your Drug Bills

By SCOTT HENSLEY

**A** WAVE OF PATENT expirations on prescription medicines taken by millions of people is creating unprecedented opportunities for patients to sharply reduce their drug costs, while still getting treatments comparable to high-priced branded versions.

But many doctors are unlikely to tell patients about generic options and pharmaceutical companies are working overtime to make it difficult for consumers to switch.

Though generic medicines are often available for pennies a day, they're every bit as good as the expensive brand names they replace. That's because their chemical make-up is essentially identical. Indeed, a recent study by a Washington foundation composed largely of health insurers found that two-thirds of the prescription drugs approved by the federal Food and Drug Administration between 1989 and 2000 were identical to existing drugs or modified versions of them.

A generic form of Prozac, the widely-used antidepressant, is now available at just over half the branded's cost (about \$45 for 30 pills, compared with \$85). Physicians say the generic also could be

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an alternative to other drugs in the class, including Zoloft (about \$66 for 30 pills), Paxil (about \$76), and Celexa.

In some cases over-the-counter remedies are also just as effective as a much more expensive prescription alternative. Ranitidine (about \$10 for 60 pills, usually taken twice a day), works as well for many people with heartburn as the expensive and hugely popular heartburn drug Prilosec, which costs about \$115 for 30 pills, taken once daily.

"Just because you're paying more money doesn't mean you're getting a better drug," says Robin Richardson, director of pharmaceutical programs, at ODS Healthplans in Portland, Ore. He says these medicines are just the first in a wave of

generics that will continue growing over the next few years.

But the options for consumers are getting trickier as drug makers engineer slight differences into patented successors to their waning blockbusters. The new antihistamine Clarinex is scarcely different from its aging cousin Claritin, which may be available as an over-the-counter drug next year. Same goes for the new heartburn remedy Nexium and its predecessor Prilosec, which is soon to go generic. (For a list of major drugs and some generic alternatives, please see chart on page D3.)

Yet, in many cases the new drugs are just different enough that a pharmacist can't substitute a cheaper generic without a doctor's permission. That leaves it up to patients to talk to their physicians about whether the new brand drug is all it's cracked up to be, and whether they'd do just as well on the generic.

"New drugs are always hyped and it's the responsibility of the health-care provider to distinguish meaningful from purported differences that may not be clinically significant for a patient," says Eric Brass, a professor at UCLA School of Medicine.

One area where there is particularly intense in-

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# How New Generics Can Cut Your Drug Expenses

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terest in generics: the cholesterol-lowering class of medicines called statins. There is now a generic available called lovastatin, giving patients prescribed Mevacor and Lipitor a cheaper alternative—about \$36 for 30 pills, compared with \$68 for Mevacor, \$59 for Lipitor.

## Promotions to Doctors

Drug companies actively promote their latest brand-name drugs to doctors, while generics generally get little or no marketing. Doctors, not surprisingly, are quick to write prescriptions for branded drugs. In most cases, a pharmacist can substitute the generic versions when a doctor writes a prescription for the brand name.

The most cost-effective choices for each patient will vary depending on individual health insurance coverage as well as medical history. Some plans may favor particular drugs over others and assess co-payments accordingly. Most plans don't cover over-the-counter remedies, which in some cases are just as good as a much more expensive prescription alternative. One caveat: a less-expensive drug that doesn't work or causes intolerable side effects is of course no bargain. Patients should always talk with their doctor and pharmacist when making medication decisions.

## Families on a Budget

Marilyn Gourley, a 60-year-old nurse disabled in a bad fall eight years ago, struggles each month to afford four prescription medicines to treat her blood pressure, cholesterol, chronic pain, and depression. At doctors' offices throughout Binghamton, N.Y., Ms. Gourley used to help families on a budget find the right medicines for them. "I never dreamed that one day I'd be on the other side of that table," she says.

She is covered by Medicare, but the federal health plan for the elderly gives doesn't provide prescription drug coverage. She and her husband, also disabled, live on fixed incomes. "We're the wealthiest nation in the world and there are people who can't afford the medicines they need," says Ms. Gourley.

But she believes consumers armed with a few questions and a little patience can slash their spending while still getting effective drugs.

## Works Just as Well

Ms. Gourley takes a generic blood pressure drug called atenolol that works just as well as the brand-name Tenormin at a fraction of the price. (A 30-pill bottle of generic atenolol in medium strength costs \$6.99 compared to \$36.57 for Tenormin at drugstore.com.)

Checking prices at various pharmacies has also yielded surprising savings. Sur-

## A Drug for All Occasions

Doctors and pharmaceuticals don't make it easy for consumers to switch from patented drugs to their generic versions. But the generics are often just as good and typically a fraction of the cost. Below, some price comparisons.

DRUGS (AVAILABILITY) <sup>1</sup>	DOSE PER TABLET	DOSES PER BOTTLE	PRICE PER BOTTLE	COMMENTS
<b>DEPRESSION</b>				
Zoloft (P)	25 mg	30	\$66.70	Fluoxetine is the generic version of Prozac. Side effects of the antidepressants drugs vary.
Paxil (P)	20 mg	30	\$76.80	
Fluoxetine hydrochloride (G)	20 mg	30	\$45.99	
Prozac (P)	20 mg	30	\$85.98	
<b>ARTHRITIS/JOINT PAIN</b>				
Celebrex (P)	200 mg	30	\$71.73	Ibuprofen and Motrin can cause serious stomach problems in rare cases.
Vioxx (P)	25 mg	30	\$73.29	
Ibuprofen (G, OTC)	600 mg	30	\$7.99	
Motrin (P, OTC)	200 mg	100	\$8.49	
<b>HEARTBURN</b>				
Prilosec (P)	20 mg	30	\$115.80	Zantac and the generic, ranitidine, work differently from Prilosec and Prevacid, but are generally used to treat the same ailments.
Pepcid AC (OTC)	10 mg	30	\$9.99	
Nexium (P)	20 mg	30	\$115.51	
Prevacid (P)	30 mg	30	\$113.70	
Ranitidine hydrochloride (G)	150 mg	60	\$10.80	
Zantac (P, OTC)	150 mg	60	\$101.57	
<b>HIGH CHOLESTEROL</b>				
Zocor (P)	10 mg	30	\$66.94	Lovastatin, the generic version of Mevacor, may not lower cholesterol as much or as quickly as Zocor and Lipitor.
Lipitor (P)	10 mg	30	\$59.86	
Lovastatin (G)	20 mg	30	\$36.00	
Mevacor (P)	20 mg	30	\$68.99	
<b>ALLERGIES</b>				
Clarinet (P)	5 mg	30	\$66.41	Benadryl and other antihistamines may cause drowsiness.
Claritin (P)	10 mg	30	\$78.60	
Allegra (P)	60 mg	60	\$70.98	
Benadryl (OTC)	25 mg <sup>2</sup>	24	\$5.25	

<sup>1</sup>P=Prescription brand; G=Generic prescription; OTC=Over the counter

Source: WSJ research; pricing from Drugstore.com

<sup>2</sup>25 mg of diphenhydramine hydrochloride.

veys regularly show prices for the same medicine can vary by 50% or more at drug stores within blocks of one another. Ms. Gourley, for instance, says she found an independent drug store across town with better deals than several national chains.

The ultimate bargains might lie just over the border. A few years ago, Ms. Gourley traveled by bus to Montreal, Canada, with a local consumer group and saved more than \$500 on a three-month supply of her medicines. Internet or mail-order pharmacies are another option. But the value of talking in person with a pharmacist who knows you can't be underestimated. Local

pharmacists often have more time and are more up-to-date on drug choices than physicians. Jonathan G. Marquess, a pharmacist in Marietta, Ga., says patients should periodically review all the medications they're taking with their pharmacist and ask for recommendations. A patient with moderate, occasional heartburn, for example, may find relief on nonprescription strength Zantac or Pepcid, blockbusters of yesteryear.

"I tell them to come back and see me in three days," Mr. Marquess says. "If things aren't better, then they need to see a doctor."