

Dose of this advice can help

cut cost of prescription drugs

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MARKETWATCH

If you are one of the nearly 47 million Americans without health insurance, or if your plan offers limited drug coverage or requires high co-payments, you probably are feeling the pinch of rising costs for prescription drugs.

From *Consumer Reports*, here are cost-cutting strategies that can help you save on medications without cutting corners

on quality — or your health:

Use mail order. Whether your pharmacy benefits manager has a mail-order service such as Express Scripts (express-scripts.com) or you order from an online pharmacy such as drugstore.com, you often can save 25 percent or more. Depending on your drug needs, you also may be able to delay entry into the Medicare "doughnut hole" coverage gap, which allows Medicare drug plans to kick in only after your out-of-pocket ex-

penses reach a certain level. In 2008, that level is estimated to be more than \$3,200.

If you opt for an online pharmacy, do your homework. Many are not licensed and might sell counterfeit or substandard medicine. The Food and Drug Administration recommends purchasing only from Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites, or VIPPS, which have a seal from the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy. For a list, go to vipps.info. The Medi-

care Rights Center, an advocacy group based in New York, also lists mail-order pharmacies, some of them based in Canada, that meet FDA criteria for safety (medicarerights.org/rxchart3.html).

Buy generics. As effective and safe as name-brand drugs, generics typically cost 30 percent to 80 percent less. Patents are expiring on several major blockbuster drugs in the next three years, and that is good news for consumers. But shop

carefully: Prices, even for generics, can vary widely from pharmacy to pharmacy.

Also, consider filling your prescriptions at discount retailers or wholesale clubs. Walmart charges \$4 for a 30-day supply of more than 360 generics. Target also offers \$4 generics, and Costco charges \$10 for 100 capsules of more than 250 generic drugs. If your prescription plan is managed by a pharmacy benefits manager, check for additional discounts. Medco

(medco.com) offers people in small to midsize businesses a 90-day supply of most generic drugs for \$10.

Ask about cheaper alternatives. Many high-cost drugs have name-brand or generic alternatives in the same category that are equally effective and considerably cheaper. *Consumer Reports* Best Buy Drugs (www.CRBESTBUYDRUGS.org) lets you look up medications in a particular class to find the safest, most affordable Best Buys.