

***Here are this week's health care news highlights from AskaPatient:***

- One-third of adults aged 40-59 have evidence of degenerative disc disease and more than half have spinal osteoarthritis. <http://ow.ly/Zal730k5MjF> (05-21-18)
- FDA launches website that reveals the names of pharma companies that are blocking generic drug development. <http://ow.ly/wlhN30k5Mo8> (05-21-18)
- Chronic pain may be affecting 100 million Americans' ability to make decisions and adapt to new situations. <http://ow.ly/Wfdg30k5MzW> (05-21-18)
- After decades of attempting to create an oral insulin pill, researchers are hoping to have one on the market within a few years. <http://ow.ly/mblA30k5MN9> (05-22-18)
- Check out AskaPatient to see how hundreds of patients have rated diabetes medications they have been prescribed: <http://ow.ly/dO5D30k8jVH> (05-22-18)
- Slow down and savor your meals to shed pounds and maintain a healthy weight, 5-year study suggests. <http://ow.ly/fcH930k5MZ0> (05-22-18)
- Congo begins administering experimental vaccines to medical staff to help combat the recent Ebola outbreak. <http://ow.ly/vaJv30k6Yc6> (05-22-18)
- FDA releases letter warning that a drug manufacturer used the same uncleaned equipment for pesticides and human drugs. <http://ow.ly/v9Ue30k6YAr> (05-23-18)
- Exercise is good for improving fitness but not effective at staving off cognitive decline in people who already have dementia, study suggests. <http://ow.ly/1QS930k6YKg> (05-23-18)
- Taking a daily dose of baking soda may reduce inflammation associated with autoimmune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis. <http://ow.ly/7r0030k6YYt> (05-23-18)
- Young people with subtle hearing loss show brain changes of adults who are much older. <http://ow.ly/ultv30k8jol> (05-24-18)
- Johns Hopkins study finds that child sexual abuse in the U.S. carries a massive financial burden in addition to the psychological damage. <http://ow.ly/PQfn30k8jxM> (05-24-18)
- Eating an egg a day may lower your risk of cardiovascular disease by 18 percent. <http://ow.ly/rC9O30k8jE6> (05-24-18)
- New theory from leading cancer scientists says childhood leukemia may be caused by common infections such as the flu. <http://ow.ly/HAxQ30k8jPl> (05-25-18)
- Hotter body temperatures help people fight infections and tumors faster than lower temperatures. <http://ow.ly/iXUb30k9uH6> (05-25-18)
- Sleeping in on the weekends can make up for shorter nights of sleep during the work week. <http://ow.ly/buZu30k9uR0> (05-25-18)
- Eczema drug alleviates symptoms in people with severe asthma better than standard therapies. <http://ow.ly/QRAA30kaI3i> (05-26-18)
- Depression accelerates brain aging, which helps explain why people with depression have a higher risk of dementia. <http://ow.ly/eNEf30kaI9i> (05-26-18)
- A California man will take Monsanto to trial on claims that the company hid the cancer-causing dangers of Roundup. <http://ow.ly/jv6g30kaInI> (05-26-18)

***From AskaPatient: Five years later, another Consumer Reports secret shopper investigation reveals wide disparity in Rx prices among pharmacies***

**Shopping for 30-day supply of generic Lipitor  
(atorvastatin)**

**Average Discounted Retail Prices by Pharmacy**

	2013	2018
Healthwarehouse.com	\$16	\$10
Costco	\$17	\$13
Independent Pharmacies	\$42	\$15
Walmart	\$68	\$30
Grocery Stores	\$84	\$32
Walgreens	\$65	\$65
Rite Aid	\$134	\$128
CVS/CVS Target	\$150	\$135

Source: May 2013 Consumer Reports, "[Same Generic Drug, Many Prices](#)"; May 2018 Consumer Reports, "[Shop around for better prices](#)"

With more people having insurance plans with very high deductibles or poor drug coverage, more patients are paying for drugs out-of-pocket, and so they need to be cost-conscious about where they shop. Based on Consumer Reports' latest survey of drug prices, where you shop can make a big difference in your wallet. In fact, even for those with insurance co-pays, simply paying for the drug out-of-pocket could be cheaper than the co-pay itself. Check out the Consumer Reports link above for additional pharmacy price comparisons for the generics of Actos, Celebrex, Cymbalta, and Plavix for 2018.

How can big-box stores like Costco sell drugs so much less expensively than a CVS or Rite Aid? For one thing, they handle the Pharmacy Benefit Manager functions (PBM) internally, so they can negotiate prices and pass on those savings to the consumer. Costco and Walmart count on gaining new customers and additional sales by luring customers into the store with great deals on prescriptions. Traditional drug stores like Rite Aid and CVS have a different business model; their profit center is the pharmacy, and while they may offer more customer service perks, their mark-up on prescription drugs drives the profits.

When an uninformed consumer buys a prescription at a pharmacy, it can have unfair consequences. A patient pays the co-pay (not knowing that the cash price could be cheaper), and the Pharmacy Benefit Manager (PBM) for the insurance company can keep the difference between the copay and the cash price of the drug. According to some analysts, the insurance company doesn't care one way or the other. Because the cost of the drug is covered by the patient, they don't have to do any reimbursements. See [Pharmacy Times](#) for a discussion of this practice and when pharmacists should advise the consumer to pay cash. Consumer Reports recommends **always** asking your pharmacy about generic substitutions, discounts that might be available, and about whether getting a 90 day prescription would be a cheaper option.

There are more pieces to the drug pricing mystery. "Blink Health" generic discount web site, for instance, offers a price of \$0 for a one month supply of our example generic drug **atorvastatin (Lipitor)** without an explanation of how they can offer such a discount. It is clear that the patient (especially the under-insured patient) who doesn't have the time, energy, or knowledge to do a lot of research legwork, is often the loser financially in the pharmacy pricing scenarios that exist today.

In April, right on the heels of the publication of the 2018 Consumer Reports pharmacy prices comparison, CVS announced that it was going to be launching a new tool ([Rx Savings Finder](#)) to help its pharmacists find coupons, discounts, and the best prices for customers. But will this tool save the pharmacist's time and the patient's money, or will it be a burdensome addition to pharmacist's already hectic workload, and still result in the patient paying more than they would at a competing pharmacy that offers low prices to start with? It could be that the market will decide that pricing the drugs transparently at the get-go is a better business practice for customer and pharmacist alike. Only time will tell, but in the meantime consumers need to be vigilant about exploring their drug purchasing options.

#### More reading:

- Insight from industry analyst Adam Fein: [Why Retail Pharmacies Still Overcharge](#)
- Court document recently unsealed: a whistleblower accused CVS and its PBM, CVS Caremark, of overcharging Medicare for drugs. CMS rules state that "payments are required to be based on the actual cost of a drug, meaning the drug price received by the pharmacy." <http://www.healthcarefinancenews.com/news/aetna-whistleblower-accuses-cvs-healths-caremark-fraud-medicare-part-d-drug-prices>

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