

That Discount at the Pharmacy Counter May Pack Hidden Costs

Copay coupons encourage patients to use the brand-name version of a drug, even when a cheaper, generic version might be available.

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Next time you go to the pharmacy, you might be offered a coupon on your prescription drugs. While it may sound like a great deal — with the prospect of saving hundreds of dollars — the decision to accept it is complicated, especially for people with insurance.

Even as prescription drug costs rise, patients with commercial insurance have slowed their use of manufacturer-sponsored drug coupons in recent years, according to [a study published](#) April 6 by the Journal of the American Medical Association.

Manufacturers are offering just as many of them, “but still, we see a lot of affordability issues among this commercially insured population,” said So-Yeon Kang, the study’s main author, who is an assistant professor of health management and policy at Georgetown University.

“Patients are at the intersection and battle place between these payers and manufacturers,” she said.

Drug manufacturers distribute copay coupon cards to consumers online or in person at the pharmacy counter. These manufacturer-sponsored coupons are not the same as discount card services from companies like GoodRx, which negotiate lower bulk pricing for prescription drugs, then pass those savings along to the consumer.

Manufacturers issue the coupons to keep their drugs competitive by offering patients short-term savings. Consumers pay less out-of-pocket, often for brand-name drugs. This encourages patients to use the brand-name version of the drug, even when a cheaper, generic version might be available.

Some insurers say this unfairly puts them on the hook for pricier drugs. They say monthly premiums are higher as a result, punishing consumers and patients, not the manufacturers.

So, should you use manufacturer-sponsored prescription drug coupons when they are offered?

The short answer: It depends.

Here are five things to consider:

1. What if you do not have insurance?

If you are uninsured, using a coupon can be a great way to save money, especially if there is no generic version of the drug.

TrumpRx is a new federally funded initiative that acts as a prescription drug coupon dashboard for patients. Some of the coupons come from manufacturers, while others do not. Not every drug has a coupon offer, but the portal will save consumers money on drugs for those that do, especially in the short term.

Michelle Long, a senior policy manager at KFF who studies patient and consumer protections, said people without insurance can save money by using TrumpRx or manufacturer coupons. (KFF is the health policy research, polling, and news organization that includes KFF Health News.)

“I wouldn’t brush it off entirely because it’s got Trump’s name on it,” Long said. “For a lot of people who take certain medications, there really could be some real savings.”

Still, Long said, TrumpRx lists only about 85 drugs, among thousands approved by the FDA. It is important to note that drug coupons have limitations and guidelines. They do not last forever. When they are exhausted, uninsured consumers may have to pay full price for the drug.

2. What if you have commercial health insurance?

For people with insurance, the answer is a little more complicated.

If the drug isn’t covered by your insurance plan or if you intend to pay cash, then the coupon may be the way to go. If not, be wary.

Insurance coverage varies for certain kinds of drugs, such as GLP-1 obesity drugs. Kang’s study found that coupon use by commercial insurance holders on obesity drugs dropped from 54.6% of prescriptions in 2017 to only 2.5% in 2024, even though use of the drugs has been rising in the United States.

She said this reflects the growing number of patients paying cash for the drugs as prices decline, along with insurers’ reluctance to cover them and manufacturers’ shifting focus from coupon distribution to marketing campaigns.

3. What should you do if you expect high medical costs this year?

If you have insurance and anticipate meeting your deductible for the year through health care visits and treatments, consider using the coupons.

Coupons let you pay less out-of-pocket when you visit the pharmacy, but your insurer likely won’t

count the value of the coupon toward your deductible. Only use a coupon if there is no generic option available and if you know you'd otherwise hit your deductible.

4. What if you have insurance but low overall medical costs?

The answer will almost always be: Don't use the coupon.

Unless the drug you are looking for is not covered by your insurance plan, using coupons will put you at risk for higher indirect costs. It's also often more advantageous to spend toward your deductible.

Watch out for copay adjustment programs that insurers use to discourage the use of drug coupons. They come in two common forms, Long said.

"[Copay accumulators](#)" allow the use of drug coupons up to their full value, but the amount of the coupon won't count toward patients' deductibles or out-of-pocket maximums. That makes it harder for them to reach the threshold at which insurers will pitch in on prescriptions and other medical care. It can also mean a patient will eventually start paying the full cost of the drug because they haven't yet met their annual deductible.

"Copay maximizers" use a similar technique that also prevents the coupon value from counting toward deductibles. Maximizer programs use a third party to [adjust patients' copayments](#) over the course of a year to match the amount of the manufacturers' coupons.

Insurers sometimes offer the programs to consumers under euphemistic names like "Employee Savings Program" that sound good in theory, but, in reality, take away some of the value of the coupons, Long said.

Initially, consumers will see savings at the pharmacy counter, but they may end up paying more in the long run.

5. What if you're on Medicaid or Medicare?

Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries are prohibited from using manufacturer-sponsored coupons.

A federal anti-kickback law makes it illegal to give someone anything of value to influence their decision to purchase something that will ultimately be paid for by a federal health care program. The law also prevents remuneration, which includes waiving copays and charging less than fair-market value for a product.

Manufacturer drug coupons [squarely fit within both](#) categories.

Some states, notably California and Massachusetts, prohibit or limit the use of manufacturer drug coupons when a generic version of the drug is available — highlighting the tension among manufacturers, health plans, and the government.

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