Here is what we found out about prescription drug prices

We all know that prescription drug prices are high. But did you know that the price you pay at one pharmacy could be several times what you’d be charged at another pharmacy, for the same drug?

That’s the conclusion of U.S. PIRG Education Fund’s latest report, “The Real Price of Medications,” based on surveys of more than 250 pharmacies in 12 states from Massachusetts to Wisconsin to Arizona to Florida. CBS This Morning was among the media outlets that picked up the story.

Our survey found the majority of pharmacies selling common medications at vastly inflated prices—averaging almost nine times the cheapest available price. In just one example, the majority of pharmacies sold the same insulin (same drug, same dose) for $445 a month. The cheapest price we found was $96.

Counterintuitively, our research found that small chain stores and independent pharmacies tend to be less expensive than the big chain stores.

Healthcare remains a top concern among the public. Polling reveals that most people like their health plans; they just think they pay too much. And they’re right. One of the reasons is the cost of prescription drugs—which, it turns out, might be severely inflated depending on where you shop.

While consumers can shop around to save money right now, we shouldn’t face these hidden price discrepancies. They are bad for consumers struggling to pay for expensive medicine, they’re bad for our insurance premiums, they’re bad for public trust in our health care system, and worst of all, they’re bad for consumers’ health, as people ration their own medications.

“These real price variations we’re seeing have huge health consequences for Americans,” our national network’s Consumer Watchdog Adam Garber tells CBS News. “These prices are often how they determine how much insurers are going to pay for the drugs … it sort of sets the whole pricing scheme up.”
Bipartisan momentum is building behind solutions, from patent reforms that would encourage more generic drugs, to transparency steps that would nudge the market toward greater competition. Others are looking at how to end price gouging on medications, which drives up cost without any benefit to our health. Red, purple and blue states, from Tennessee to Pennsylvania to Illinois, are looking at steps they can take to rein in high prescription drug prices. Oregon is already cutting waste in the health insurance industry, and California is making hospital prices more transparent, thanks to laws backed by the PIRGs in these states.

Americans want quality care at a fair price. PIRG remains committed to finding practical steps that government, industry and consumers can take to achieve just that.

How to get the best deal

Our research found that common life-saving medication prices varied greatly, even within the same state or city, undermining quality of care. Here are three tips for finding the best deal on your prescription medications.

1. Save big by shopping around
   By shopping around, patients can save a total of $102 (on hypertension medication) to $5,400 (on an inhaler) off of the median prices of the surveyed medications annually.

2. Smaller pharmacies are cheaper
   Eight of the 12 drugs surveyed were between eight percent and 840 percent more expensive at most large pharmacies when compared to smaller and independent pharmacies.

3. Generics offer more value
   Switching to generic drugs, even years after they come onto the market, can save you a ton of money. For example, switching from branded Nexium to its generic version could save patients an estimated $756 annually.

This report is a part of our PIRG Consumer Watchdog campaign, which alerts consumers to dangers in the marketplace.

NEWS BRIEFS

BEYOND PLASTIC

Maryland and Maine become the first states to ban plastic foam. Who’s next?

Maryland and Maine are the first states in the U.S. to put a plastic foam container ban on the books, but other states aren’t far behind.

On May 24, Maryland became the nation’s second state to ban polystyrene foam cups and containers, after Gov. Larry Hogan let the bill become law without his signature. Maine passed a polystyrene foam ban earlier this year. Maryland’s ban will go into effect on July 1, 2020, nearly a year sooner than Maine’s.

“These two states did something historic in becoming the first in the country to ban single-use plastic foam,” said Alex Truelove, director of our national network’s Zero Waste campaign. “Other states should seize the opportunity and follow suit.”
Legislatures in Oregon, New Jersey, Connecticut and Vermont are considering similar bans.

“Nothing we use for five minutes should be allowed to pollute our planet for hundreds of years,” said Alex. “I’m happy to know Maryland and Maine agree. Who’s next?”

HOLD THE ANTIBIOTICS: WENDY’S

We’re calling on Wendy’s to ‘Hold the Antibiotics’ from its beef supply chain

How can the country’s third-largest burger chain help save the cornerstone of modern medicine? By buying only beef raised without the routine use of antibiotics.

On March 28, WISPIRG and our national network launched our campaign to convince Wendy’s to do just that. A new estimate suggests up to 162,000 Americans die from antibiotic-resistant infections every year. If we want to keep antibiotics working, companies such as Wendy’s need to stop sourcing beef from large, industrial livestock operations that overuse medically important antibiotics.

“We can’t waste life-saving medicines to produce cheap beef. Wendy’s can use its buying power to help move the beef industry away from overusing antibiotics,” said Matt Wellington, national director of our Stop the Overuse of Antibiotics campaign.

Wendy’s no longer serves chicken raised on medically important antibiotics. But the chain earned only a D- on the latest Chain Reaction scorecard put out by the Chain Reaction coalition, which includes our research partner U.S. PIRG Education Fund. The scorecard graded top burger chains on antibiotic use in their beef supply chains.

TRANSFORM TRANSPORTATION

Wisconsin budget boosts transit, but falls a few miles short

Wisconsin’s appetite for bigger roads has plunged the state into debt and put more polluting cars on the road.

Decision-makers have created a transportation network where driving is often the only way to get around, neglecting public transportation, walking and biking options that help create cleaner, more livable communities.

That’s why WISPIRG and our partners held a Week of Action in July. We spoke with dozens of transit riders across the state, highlighting the vital role that public transportation plays in the lives of many Wisconsinites.

“A lot of people just want to take the bus to go to church or weekend activities,” said Katherine, a bus rider from Eau Claire. “But because there’s no Sunday bus, they aren’t able to get around.”

The budget just signed by Gov. Evers boosts transit funding—but we still have a long way to go to create a transportation system that really works for all Wisconsinites.

BE AN ADVOCATE FOR WISCONSIN’S FUTURE

Support our work in the public interest by including a gift to WISPIRG or WISPIRG Foundation in your will, trust or retirement accounts.

For more information call 1-800-841-7299 or send an email to: plannedgiving@wispirg.org

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that Americans throw away an estimated 82 cups per person every year. Polystyrene foam can’t be recycled, and it takes hundreds of years to fully degrade — which means that every piece of foam ever made is still out there and will continue to pollute our planet for hundreds of years to come.
Public education, member action strengthen call to ban Roundup

The more we educate the public about Monsanto’s weedkiller, Roundup, the more support we find for banning the product—the residue of which can be found practically everywhere, from breakfast cereal to ice cream. In July, WISPIRG and our national network kicked off a summer public education drive in 15 states.

“Ever since the World Health Organization determined Roundup’s main ingredient, glyphosate, is a probable carcinogen, we have been warning the public,” said our Ban Roundup Campaign Director Kara Cook-Schultz.

“We’re doing all we can to get the facts to legislators about why we should ban Roundup until and unless it’s proven safe,” said WISPIRG State Director Peter Skopec. “The support and action of our members are making it easier to get state decision-makers to listen.”

Over the course of the summer, our canvassers enlisted more than 47,000 citizens nationwide to join our call on state leaders to ban Roundup.