

HOW TO TELL IF THE PRICE IS RIGHT ON THE PRESCRIPTION

NEW YORK: Filling a prescription is no longer the simple errand you run after a doctor visit. With drug prices rising and insurance coverage shrinking, it pays to ask questions and do a little research before handing over your insurance card at the pharmacy counter. Having coverage offers no guarantee that you're getting the best price for your medicine. Customers of CVS and Walgreens brought that concern to light earlier this month when they sued the drugstore chains over prices paid for generic prescriptions. The lawsuits accuse the companies of charging insured patients more for generic drugs than what people pay without coverage. It also says the drugstores don't tell insured patients about the cheaper option. CVS and Walgreens reject the claims and promise

to fight them. Before you fill your next prescription, consider these steps to help find the best possible price.

Talk to your doctor

Start a habit of asking your doctor about prices whenever you get a new prescription. If you have insurance, bring information about your formulary, or list of covered drugs, to your visit. Your doctor deals with many different insurers and may not know the costs tied to your coverage. The list can tell your doctor how your treatment or any alternatives might be covered, said AARP drug pricing expert Leigh Purvis.

Do some research

Approach prescription buying like car shopping. You don't want to do it with-

out some idea of the prices in your market. Websites like GoodRx and WeRx can show how drug prices without insurance will vary by store. Knowing what's in the market helps you tell quickly if your favorite drugstore is pricey. "When we talk about the price of a drug, it's sort of an arbitrary estimate instead of a hard-and-fast rule," said Caitlin Morris of the advocacy group Families USA. When comparing costs online, note that some websites may show the cash price without insurance while others only show the cost if you use one of their coupons.

Quiz the pharmacist

The best deal you can get may be the price you pay through insurance. This is especially true with brand-name drugs. The price without insurance for

those is typically much more expensive than the co-payment or deductible you pay with coverage. However, most prescriptions filled are generic and the cash price for those drugs may be cheaper than what a person would pay through insurance, depending on your plan. Ask the pharmacist what your prescription will cost based on your coverage before you have it filled. If the price is too high, ask what it would cost without coverage. If your research turned up a lower price elsewhere, ask your pharmacist if they would match that price. The drugstore also may offer a discount program. Pharmacists in some states can substitute a brand-name drug for a cheaper generic. But check first with your doctor about how that may affect your treatment.

Understand the risks

Paying cash for prescriptions comes with some side effects. Those costs won't help you reach your insurance plan's annual deductible or out-of-pocket maximum, after which the insurer picks up more of the bill. Paying cash or using different drugstores for the best price also means that your insurer or your regular pharmacist won't be monitoring to make sure your medicines don't conflict and cause a bad reaction. That responsibility will fall largely on you, especially if you have more than one doctor. If a prescription is still too expensive after all your research and negotiating, you can walk away and not pay for it. But doing so won't help you get better and it could make your condition more expensive to treat later on. — AP

GAZA SWIMMER'S DEATH PUTS SPOTLIGHT ON POLLUTION CRISIS

GAZA CITY: The death of a little boy after swimming in polluted seawater has put the spotlight on Gaza's pollution crisis and the human impact of desperate electricity shortages in the Palestinian enclave. Mohammed Al-Sayis, five, died late last month a few days after swimming in the sewage-polluted waters, with his brothers also hospitalized, his family and health ministry said. Dozens of others have been treated after swimming along the strip's filthy Mediterranean coastline in the past two months, a ministry

spokesman in Gaza said.

Pollution in Gaza is not a new phenomena—a decade of a crippling Israeli blockade, coupled with three devastating wars with the Jewish state since 2008, have left infrastructure falling apart. But the worsening spat between the two leading Palestinian political blocs has exacerbated an already grim situation for the two million residents of the impoverished and densely-populated Gaza Strip. The Palestinian Authority in the West Bank has sought to squeeze the Islamist

group Hamas which controls Gaza.

In April, it reduced the amount of electricity they buy from Israel for Gaza, where the enclave's sole power plant is barely operational. The electricity shortage is so severe that all of Gaza's sewage treatment facilities have ground to a halt in recent months, according to Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights. As a result, sewage that was previously cleaned and pumped further out into the sea is being released along the coast untreated. At least 100,000 cubic meters of sewage is being pumped into the sea each day, according to the United Nations, which says more than two-thirds of the coastline is polluted.

The UN has previously estimated the whole of Gaza will be uninhabitable by 2020, but a recent report has said that catastrophe is likely to come sooner. Ahmed Halas, an official in the environment agency, told AFP all of Gaza's beaches are polluted to varying degrees and the health ministry advises against swimming altogether. It has also spread beyond Gaza—last month a beach in southern Israel was temporarily closed after sewage from Gaza washed upstream.

Our only outlet

While the electricity crisis has caused the pollution that has ruined the beaches, it has also driven Gazans to take to the seaside as an escape. The enclave's borders with Israel and Egypt are all but sealed, but it has a 40-kilometre coastline stretching the length of the strip along the Mediterranean. On the edge of a desert, temperatures can reach over 35 degrees Celsius in summer months. Long, power-free summer days in sweltering heat have seen children off school for the holidays nag their parents to go to the beach, tantalizingly close anywhere in tiny Gaza.

There are few public pools to cool down, while many houses have little water. Around 95 percent of Gaza's groundwater is unsuitable for human consumption. Yasser Al-Shanti, head of the water authority in Gaza, said that Gaza needed an extra 120 million liters of water a year. Those who can afford it pay to keep their families cool. "The water in the house is unsuitable for drinking or showering. The sea water is polluted and mixed with sewage," said Humam, 34, as he poured water on his four children from a filtered water truck. But the poorest in the enclave have no option.

On Gaza's beaches, hundreds of children still play in the sea on an average day, with thousands flocking there on Fridays, the Muslim day of rest. Mohammed Al-Sayis went swimming with his siblings in Sheikh Ijlin in southern Gaza after pressuring their father Ahmed to give them a breather from the summer heat. "It's hot and humid and there is no power, water or fans in the house," said his devastated father Ahmed. "The sea is our only outlet." —AFP



GAZA: Palestinians spend time at the pool in Gaza City. Around 95 percent of Gaza's groundwater is unsuitable for human consumption. There are few public pools to cool down, while many houses have little water. — AFP



NEW YORK: Information cards provide calorie count and price for food items on display at a Whole Foods store, in New York. — AP

NYC CALORIE RULE SCRUTINIZED IN COURTS OF LAW, AND SCIENCE

NEW YORK: As a court fight simmers over calorie counts on chain restaurant menus, scientists say the jury's still out on whether giving people the numbers spurs them to eat healthier. The city says that by requiring eateries to tell people that their \$4 cheeseburger will also cost them about 540 calories, it's helping diners make informed choices in an era of rising obesity.

New York City's first-in-the-nation rule took full effect in 2008. It was copied by other cities and counties and a half-dozen states and became part of President Barack Obama's 2010 health care overhaul. The repeatedly delayed federal regulation, which extends to grocery and convenience store chain menus, is now set to take effect next year. But plenty of opponents to the idea remain, including some who question its effectiveness.

Studies to date haven't conclusively shown that restaurant-goers, on the whole, actually order lighter foods when the calorie tally is right there. It appears to influence some people, in some settings, and possibly restaurants' recipes, researchers say. "What we haven't seen so far is any sort of dramatic change in the number of calories purchased at the population level," says Dr Brian Elbel, a New York University health policy professor who co-authored a 2014 analysis of 31 studies on the subject, some of them his own. But "some people are definitely seeing and using this information."

The National Association of Convenience Stores cited some of that

research when it sued to stop New York City from enforcing a retooled rule expanding the calorie labeling requirements to groceries and other small markets, saying the city was forcing businesses to spend thousands of dollars complying with a local rule when a national one is coming. On Friday, a Manhattan federal judge approved a deal among lawyers on both sides that ensures the city will not enforce the expansion before May.

The agreement also ensures that calorie counts won't disappear from chains that have posted them for years. "This addresses the most basic of needs - providing us with nutrition information to make healthful decisions at the time of decision-making," spokeswoman Stephanie Buhle said this week. About 1 million New Yorkers see calorie data every day, according to Health Department research, and a 2011 Quinnipiac University poll found 79 percent of city voters found the information useful.

But if it's useful, do people use it?

At least three research analyses have said there's no definitive proof it leads to lower-calorie orders for diners and eateries in general, though researchers involved note that they may not have captured small effects. Some scientists feel the research shows the policy falls short. Menu labeling "might not be the proper prescription," Indiana University medical professor Dr Aaron Campbell wrote in The New York Times in 2015. But some individual studies have found effects. — AP

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