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Diplomates American Board of Internal Medicine & Cardiovascular Diseases
A medical practice dedicated to the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of heart disease.

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MEDICAL
GROUP

FROM: The Doctors Desk.

Generic drugs usually provide savings with no difference in therapeutic effectiveness

Frequently patients find their brand name prescription medication will not be covered by their insurance plan or their co-pay is higher. Often, the insurer will offer a generic version at a co-pay that is less. Are generic medications as good as the brand name product?

A recent review of generic medications in the Medical Letter on Drugs and Therapeutics (Volume 51 Issue 123, October 19, 2009) addresses this question. The Medical Letter did a systematic review of 47 studies comparing generic and brand name drugs used to treat cardiovascular diseases. The authors concluded that there was no evidence that brand name drugs were superior to their generic counterparts. The Medical Letter is a prestigious subscription journal that does not accept any advertising.

Usually only one manufacturer produces a brand name drug whereas several manufacturers can produce a generic drug. All manufacturers come under FDA regulation. For a generic drug to get FDA approval, the active drug must have the exact same chemical make-up and bioequivalence. However, there sometimes can be subtle differences in the delivery system or non-active “fillers” for the drug. These differences rarely result in any clinically meaningful problem for the patient although in rare instances a patient might have a sensitivity or intolerance to a different filler or delivery system.

The generic drug manufacturers compete with the brand name manufacturers and with each other. This sometimes allows for phenomenal savings. Some research suggests there are exceptions to the equivalence of generic and brand name drugs. The Medical Letter recommends that levothyroxine and anti-seizure drugs be obtained in the branded form or from only one generic drug manufacturer.

Coumadin is a drug used to treat or prevent clotting disorders. It comes in a generic form called warfarin. There is a narrow effective range for the drug, which has to be monitored with blood tests. The brand name manufacturer argues Coumadin produces a more consistent effect than the generic versions. The FDA has not accepted this position. In our practice, while we have had some concern with using generic warfarin for Coumadin, we generally have not found significant problems with the generic versions. However, it is advisable to ask your pharmacist for warfarin made by the same generic manufacturer when you refill your prescription.

When our patients start on a new medication that is available from a generic manufacturer, we usually recommend using the generic form. There is no scientific consensus that the brand name version is any better. Even if the patient does not save directly, we all benefit from the aggregate reduction in health care costs. If a patient has been on a brand medication and can save money by switching to the generic formulation or even a less expensive brand of the same drug class, it usually can be done without any ill effects but we believe it ultimately should be the patient's decision. In rare instances, patients might get mixed up due to the different appearance of a generic version of a brand-drug. Some patients prefer not to “rock the boat” and not make the switch. While that is not unreasonable, one has to weigh whether it is worth the extra cost.

We encourage our patients to discuss these and any other questions they have regarding their medications.

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Some Cost Comparisons

(retail price, does not account for formulary coverage or insurance co-pays):

Branded drug		Generic Equivalent	
Coreg* (12.5 mg)	\$4.76 two	carvedilol* (12.5)	\$0.66 two
Coreg CR (40 mg)	\$4.29 each	<i>not available</i>	
Toprol XL (50 mg)	\$1.43 each	metoprolol succinate (ER) (50 mg)	\$1.13 each
Lanoxin (0.125 mg)	\$0.73 each	digoxin (0.25 mg)	\$0.62 each
Coumadin (5 mg)	\$1.68 each	warfarin (5 mg)	\$0.47 each
Lasix (40 mg)	\$0.87 each	furosemide (40 mg)	\$0.47 each
Norvasc (5 mg)	\$2.41 each	amlodipine (5 mg)	\$0.77 each
Zocor (40 mg)	\$4.73 each	simvastatin (40 mg)	\$0.93 each
Lipitor (20 mg)	\$4.53 each	<i>not available</i>	
Crestor (10 mg)	\$4.69 each	<i>not available</i>	
Prilosec (40 DR)	\$8.76 each	omeprazole (40 mg DR)	\$4.25 each
Nexium (40 mg)	\$5.77 each	omeprazole OTC (20 mg)	\$1.86 two
		<i>not available</i>	

*Has to be taken twice a day compared to the once daily "CR" brand version.

Things to note above:

- 1) For some medications, generic prices are not that much lower than the brand and if the patient or doctor has a strong preference for the brand, the extra cost might not be that significant.

Other ways to consider saving money with either brand or generic drugs:

- 2) Often mail order for 60 or 90 day supplies will save some money and you can avoid dealing with refills every month. However, make sure you order enough in advance to ensure timely delivery before you medication runs out. Check with your insurance plan.
- 3) Consider getting double the dose and splitting the pill in half if it is scored or with a pill cutter. This will not work with capsules and some time-release or long-acting medications. Ask your doctor if this is an option for any of your medication. **Please note:** If we write a prescription for double the dose and you are supposed to take half a pill, the prescription has to state "half a pill." We have to state exactly how you should be taking the pill not only because the prescription is a legal document but also to avoid confusion for the patient, the pharmacist or the doctor which can lead to dangerous medication errors. If you are paying full price for your medication, then this is a useful option. If you have a set co-pay on your prescription plan for either a 30-day or 90-day supply then this might not make a difference (unless your insurance company offers it as cost-saving option).