

By Susan L. Comer

# The Generic Solution

Good Medicine,  
Real Savings



**W**hen you think about the word “generic,” what comes to your mind? Do you see yourself shopping and trying to decide if you should buy the brand-name product versus the store’s generic version of the item? The word generic, it seems, has a bit of an identity problem.

However, generic can also mean choice for you as a consumer. And when it comes to prescription drugs, a choice in price is just what the doctor ordered.

## Name Game

Everybody likes recognition. Trouble is, when you buy a brand-name item, you pay for the name and the

advertising. But generic drugs, by definition, involve no promotional costs. “As far as value goes,” says Carlo Michelotti, RPh, MPH, CEO of the California Pharmacists Association, “generics are consistently less expensive.”

But do they work as well as name brands? In order to receive approval by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), a generic drug must be therapeutically equivalent to its brand-name counterpart. “On effectiveness,” says Michelotti, “they’re exactly the same.” By the time a generic arrives on the market, its “parent” drug (the name brand) is at least 17 years old, the length of a drug’s patent protection. Thus, with

# The Switch is On!

## Why Prescriptions Go Over the Counter and What That Means For You

**T**he choice of generics is one way to take an active role in managing your health care costs. The proliferation of “Rx-to-OTC switches” is another. A switch is the progression of a prescription-only drug to over-the-counter (OTC) status, following FDA approval.

Says Tim Covington, M.S., Pharm.D., Bruno Professor of Pharmacy at Samford University and executive director of the Managed Care Institute in Birmingham, AL, “If the patent expires and there’s evidence of ability on the part of consumers to use the drug according to package labeling, and the drug has a real high safety profile, there’s a good chance that prescription drugs can be switched to over-the-counter.”

According to Covington, some 1,000 nonprescription products contain active ingredients formerly prescription-only. “Historically,” he says, “the FDA has approved Rx-to-OTC switches at a fraction of prescription strength. But an interesting trend seems to be setting in as far as the FDA is concerned on these switches, because the last three have been at formerly prescription strength”—Prilosec OTC (20 mg), Claritin (10 mg) and Pepcid AC Maximum Strength (20 mg).



“They’ve taken a pretty large leap forward in the labeling of OTC drugs with the ‘Drug Facts’ label, which has really been fashioned after the ‘Nutrition Facts’ label in terms of its format,” says Dr. Covington. “You know, larger print and more bolding. It’s much easier for the consumer to read.”

The average cost of a brand-name prescription in 2003 was \$82.76 and for a generic it was \$20.36, says Dr. Covington. In contrast, a nonprescription drug has an average cost of \$7 to \$10. Thus, OTC drugs frequently cost less than a copayment. “None of these [switched] OTC drugs are what we call ultra-expensive, and a lot of patients really like to participate in their health care,” says Dr. Covington. “It’s just another health care option for them.”

generics, you’re taking medicine with a well-documented track record of safety and effectiveness.

Why, then, do doctors often write prescriptions for brand names? In part, because physicians are the target of heavy advertising by drug companies. Whenever your doctor writes a prescription for you, it’s a good idea to ask if generics are available and appropriate.

Also, make sure your pharmacist knows that you prefer generics. If your prescription is written for a brand name, the pharmacist can phone your physician for permission

to dispense a generic. Says Sharlea Leatherwood, P.D., president of the National Community Pharmacists Association and owner of three pharmacies in Kansas City, MO, “We actually have a very high generic substitution rate in our pharmacies because we try to help patients find the best alternative for them, and for their pocket-books.”

So the next time you’re filling a prescription, remember that generics give you another choice—and another way to save! ●