

Q: What exactly is a Best Buy Drug?

A: A Best Buy Drug is one that is in the top tier of effectiveness in its category, has a safety record equal or better than other drugs in the category, and typically has an average retail price that is substantially lower than the most costly drug in the category. In several of our categories, a consumer can save more than \$1,000 a year by switching to a Best Buy.

Q: Why did Consumers Union initiate the Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs project?

A: We initiated the free, public education project to fill an information gap about the effectiveness and safety of prescription drugs, especially how drugs to treat a given illness or condition stack up against each other. Armed with the information, consumers — in consultation with their doctor — will be better able to choose drugs that best suit their medical needs while taking cost into account. The project also gives another perspective on the comparative value of prescription drugs, a perspective not driven by pharmaceutical industry marketing and advertising that emphasizes newer (and more costly) drugs. In addition, we were motivated by evidence that millions of Americans go without needed medicines because of their cost.

Q: What is a Best Buy Drugs report?

A: We've produced a series of free, consumer-friendly reports that examine and compare prescription drugs by treatment category. For example, we look at drugs to treat high cholesterol, allergies, arthritis pain, depression, high blood pressure, heart disease, heartburn and ulcers. Over time, we will examine the medicines in some 24 categories, including those to treat diabetes, urinary incontinence, and chronic pain. Drawing on an authoritative review of scientific studies, each report discusses and compares the effectiveness and safety of individual drugs. In each category, we pick a Best Buy Drug (or several) based on their effectiveness, safety track record, dosing convenience, and price. Side effects also are discussed. The free reports can be downloaded from the Web at www.CRBestBuyDrugs.org. Print materials also are available.

Q: What evidence is behind the Best Buy Drugs picks?

A: The medical findings in the drug reports are based primarily on a series of comprehensive and independent reviews of the scientific literature and evidence on the effectiveness and safety of drugs in specific classes. These reviews were conducted by teams of physicians and researchers at the Oregon Health & Science University Evidence-based Practice Center as part of the Drug Effectiveness Review Project, or DERP, a 15-state initiative to evaluate the comparative effectiveness and safety of prescription drugs. The Oregon research team has no financial interest in any pharmaceutical company or product. They have presented their findings in a series of highly regarded technical reports, and a member of the Oregon research team, Dr. Mark Helfand, is a consultant to this project.

Q: Are the prices used reflective of the price consumers will pay?

A: Prices for the same medicine can vary quite widely, even within a single city or town. And prices can change over time. The drug prices we cite and use to make Best Buy picks are those paid by consumers in retail pharmacies who pay cash. (We obtained drug prices from a healthcare information company that tracks the sales of prescription drugs in the United States). The prices reflect the nationwide average retail price paid for a medicine at the pharmacy. The prices do not include any adjustments for discounts or rebates negotiated by health insurers, employers or companies that manage pharmacy benefits for insurers or employers.

Q: How should the Best Buy Drugs reports be used?

A: It is not the aim of this project to replace the judgment of doctors in choosing the right drug for their patients. We urge patients to print out the reports and discuss the information with their doctor. Patients also may want to discuss them with a pharmacist or other health care provider. Studies show that doctors don't typically take price into account when prescribing medicines, even for people who have no insurance coverage. We hope the information will lead to an open discussion of price since the evidence shows that many lower-cost drugs can be just as effective as more expensive options.

Q: How can those participating in the Medicare drug program benefit?

A: We found that those Medicare recipients taking a combination of five commonly prescribed drugs -- for high cholesterol, high blood pressure, heart disease, arthritis pain, and depression -- could save between \$2,300 and \$5,300 a year by switching some or all of their drugs to *Best Buys*. Many seniors and disabled people who take several medicines regularly could avoid falling into the coverage gap (where a person pays for the entire cost of their medicines) that begins once total drug costs reach \$2,250. Even if only one drug is taken on a regular basis, the savings by switching to a Best Buy drug can be significant in Medicare, ranging from around \$280 to \$2,600 a year.

Q: Who else can benefit?

A: Our information is helpful to people who do not have any prescription drug insurance or health insurance, as well as the millions who have limited drug coverage through their health insurance programs, since they are at risk for higher out-of-pocket costs.

Q: Can my organization distribute CR Best Buy Drugs materials?

A: Any organization interested in distributing, republishing or linking to the Web site should contact Gail Shearer at 202-462-6262, or sheaga@consumer.org.