



Think Twice Before Using Drug Samples

Drug samples are a marketing strategy for pharmaceutical companies. They may seem like a good idea at the time, but a drug sample will eventually become an expensive, long term prescription. A sample for a one time antibiotic may be a good deal, but not for a drug you might take for months to years! Consider the following points before using or requesting a drug sample.

Is the medication covered by your health insurance plan? It is important to see if the drug sample provided by your doctor will be covered by your health insurance once that sample turns into a prescription.

- Rocky Mountain Health Plans strives to be good stewards of health care spending while being simultaneously grounded in evidence. For this reason, we may put certain drugs on a “non-preferred” formulary tier, or not cover them at all. Examples of this include a new medication that is not more effective or safer than currently available drugs. This can happen when a new drug is introduced into a medication class that is already very crowded. Sometimes a pharmaceutical company will change a medication just slightly to make a new, expensive brand name drug when the original drug becomes available as a generic.

Is there a similarly effective medication available as a cost saving generic?

- Many classes of drugs have generic alternatives available that provide significant cost savings compared to the latest brand name drugs that get advertised on TV and in magazines and have samples distributed to your doctor's office. Ask your doctor if a similar medication is available as a generic. By choosing the generic instead of the brand name medication available to you as a “free” sample, you are choosing a less expensive drug with many more years of doctor experience and safety.

Have you tried multiple medications to treat your condition that were not effective or you couldn't tolerate due to side effects? Many conditions have multiple treatments available.

- In some cases a drug sample will be given to see if it is effective for you and to see if you tolerate the medication. This can be useful if you have tried multiple medications to treat your condition with no success. It is still important to ask if a more cost-effective alternative is available to try and to verify that the medication is covered by your health insurance.
- Antidepressants are a good example. There is no medical evidence that one of these common medications is more effective than any other, but they have different side effects and cost. The brand name versions are heavily marketed to doctors and available as samples while the generics, with many more years of safety and efficacy information, and not marketed at all. For this reason, the treatment choice should be made on the basis of tolerability and cost. We are more likely to take our medication every day when we don't experience many side effects and when the cost is low. Most generic antidepressants cost less than \$15 per month. Compare this to brand name antidepressants like Pristiq® and Viibryd® that cost \$150-\$200 per month.

Is the drug sample being used to treat a condition that will require long-term use of that medication or short-term use?

- A sample given for a condition that is expected to last for a short period of time can be helpful. An example would be if you have an infection and your doctor gives you a sample of antibiotics to get you started.
- For conditions that will require long-term treatment, a sample can turn into an expensive, or even non-covered, prescription.

Before starting a drug sample, consider the points above and talk to your doctor to determine the best option for you. If you would like a copy of RMHPs “Tips for Reducing Your RX Costs”, visit www.rmhp.org/members/rx-info/pharmacy-library.