

## Is Your Medicine What the Doctor Ordered?

In today's economic environment, everyone is looking for ways to cut costs - including your insurance company and maybe even your pharmacist. One way they're cutting costs is by forcing physicians to prescribe treatments based solely on cost rather than on what is best for the patient.

Cost-based therapeutic substitution can harm you or your loved one, and you may not even know it is happening. This kind of substitution takes place when a third party - your insurance company or pharmacist - changes your medicine without your knowledge. The insurance providers say they do this to help reduce the burden of health care costs. But the real danger is that all medicines are not the same.

“The concern with this kind of ‘switch’ is that the patient is usually told the drugs are truly equivalent, and that the pharmacy plan will cover the less expensive drug. At times, this is done without the approval of the prescribing physician. This can result in worsening of clinical symptoms and unwanted or unnecessary medication side effects,” said Larry Tune, a geriatric psychiatrist at Emory. “I’ve had a few occasions where a substitution was made without my knowledge or approval. Usually the patient is fine, but in a few instances the patient’s health suffered. Finding the right antidepressant or anti-dementia drug for a patient sometimes involves a long, difficult period of trial and error - usually complicated by side effects of equivalent medications. Patients should not have to go back to ‘square one’ due to a decision motivated solely by financial considerations. For this reason, it is critical that the prescribing physician be kept in the loop.”

A [survey](#) conducted by the [National Consumers League](#) (NCL) found that two-thirds of people who reported meds switched for themselves or a family member said that they were not consulted about the switch. Nearly half were dissatisfied (or their family was) with how the process occurred and report that this substitution did not result in lower pocket costs.

“Consumers are justifiably concerned about the practice of therapeutic substitution, how it’s done, and who’s involved,” said Sally Greenberg, NCL Executive Director, in a [press release](#). “Without transparency, therapeutic substitution could introduce efficacy or safety issues, including unknown drug interactions and potentially serious health consequences. It may evoke confusion or fear on the part of patients already feeling frustrated by a failing health care system.”

The NCL identified the [four most common medication switches](#) are antidepressants, cardiovascular medications, epileptic medications, and proton pump inhibitors. According to Greenberg, “For some conditions and treatments, it may make good financial or medical sense to swap out one prescription for another. But, as consumers reported in our survey, it’s essential for them to be a part of this process, to know their doctor is aware and supportive of the switch, and to feel confident that their health and treatment – not financial incentives – are top priority.”

Dr. Larry Tune, geriatric psychiatrist at Emory, offers these tips to keep you safe:

***Ask your pharmacist if you've been given the exact drug your doctor prescribed.*** In Georgia, in order to keep a “switch” from taking place, your physician must write “Brand Necessary” on the prescription, in their own handwriting. This requires the pharmacy to check with the physician before making a change to your medication. This doesn't always happen, and that's why you need to be an educated consumer.

***Your doctor knows your health, while others may not.*** Consult your doctor before allowing your insurance company or pharmacist to make a change. Most medicines are not interchangeable. Medications, even in the same class, often have different active ingredients, different side effects and different dosages – they can even interact with one another, and could possibly diminish the benefit of one or more of your medications. That's why it's important to consult your doctor before you consider changing to a less expensive medicine.

***Continue to be an advocate for you or a loved one's health care... the kind that preserves the physician patient relationship.*** It's not a bad thing to change to a different medicine, as long as the physician and patient are driving that decision. Share this information with your friends and loved ones and ensure you're getting just what the doctor ordered.

###