
Prime Therapeutics fills Rx needs

Use the city's new mail-order pharmacy and save money on maintenance drugs

By Dave Schafer

Even with benefits from the city, the six medications Karen Burton takes daily would cost nearly \$2,500 per year at her local Walgreens. But the widow has found a way to ease those costs.

She uses a mail-order pharmacy.

Through the home-delivery service, Burton gets three months worth of drugs for the price of two months.

"It's a lot cheaper," said Burton, senior account clerk with the Aviation Department. "I don't think anybody wants to throw their money away."

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Since July 2000, AdvancePCS has been the mail-order pharmacy for Blue Cross Blue Shield of Texas, the city's health-care provider. That will soon change. On Jan. 1, Prime Therapeutics will become the pharmacy benefits manager for employees and retirees covered under the city's plan.

Few changes

Except for the reclassification of some drugs from preferred to nonpreferred status, members shouldn't notice any changes, said Stacy Sloan, strategic account executive with BCBSTX.

"We expect to have greater control over pharmacy costs and how we manage the pharmacy benefits for our customers," Sloan said. "The processing and how it will appear to the member will be seamless. The only changes that the member will feel will be the formulary list."

A formulary is the list of drugs BCBSTX prefers doctors prescribe. The city's formulary breaks down into three categories: generic, preferred and nonpreferred. The categories have an ascending copay of \$10, \$30 and \$45.

The city's formulary list will change May 1, 2005. The 2005 preferred drug list will be available Jan. 1 on BCBSTX's Web site, www.bcbstx.com, Sloan said.

Just three of the 25 prescription drugs

most used by city employees and retirees are moving from preferred to nonpreferred: Pravachol, Wellbutrin and Oxycontin CR. All have generic versions available.

Actos, which improves blood-sugar control for people with type 2 diabetes, is also one of those 25 most-used drugs. It will move from nonpreferred to preferred, meaning it will have a lower copayment.

Sloan said safety, effectiveness, uniqueness of drug and overall cost are factors that determine which drugs are in the preferred list.

HMO Blue Texas plan members will have access to the same pharmacies they have now. About 97 percent of PPO plan pharmacies will be covered, Sloan said.

Except for narcotics and compound drugs, which have to be mixed at the pharmacy, prescriptions with refills left won't have to be rewritten by your doctor, Sloan said.

Members who expect to run out of medication before Jan. 10, 2005, should mail their prescriptions to AdvancePCS before Dec. 24, Sloan said. Those who don't need new medications until after Jan. 10 should mail their prescription to Prime around Dec. 24.

For new prescriptions written in mid-to late December, ask your doctor to give you a 30-day script to fill at the local pharmacy and an additional 90-day prescription to send to Prime.

Prime manages pharmacy benefits for

Blue Cross Blue Shield chapters in six other states and will add two more, including Texas, in January. Because the medications are bought in bulk, the cost per pill will decrease, saving BCBSTX money.

Savings could be passed to the city and help offset the escalating cost of prescription drug benefits, which for the city increased 7.25 percent in FY 2003-2004.

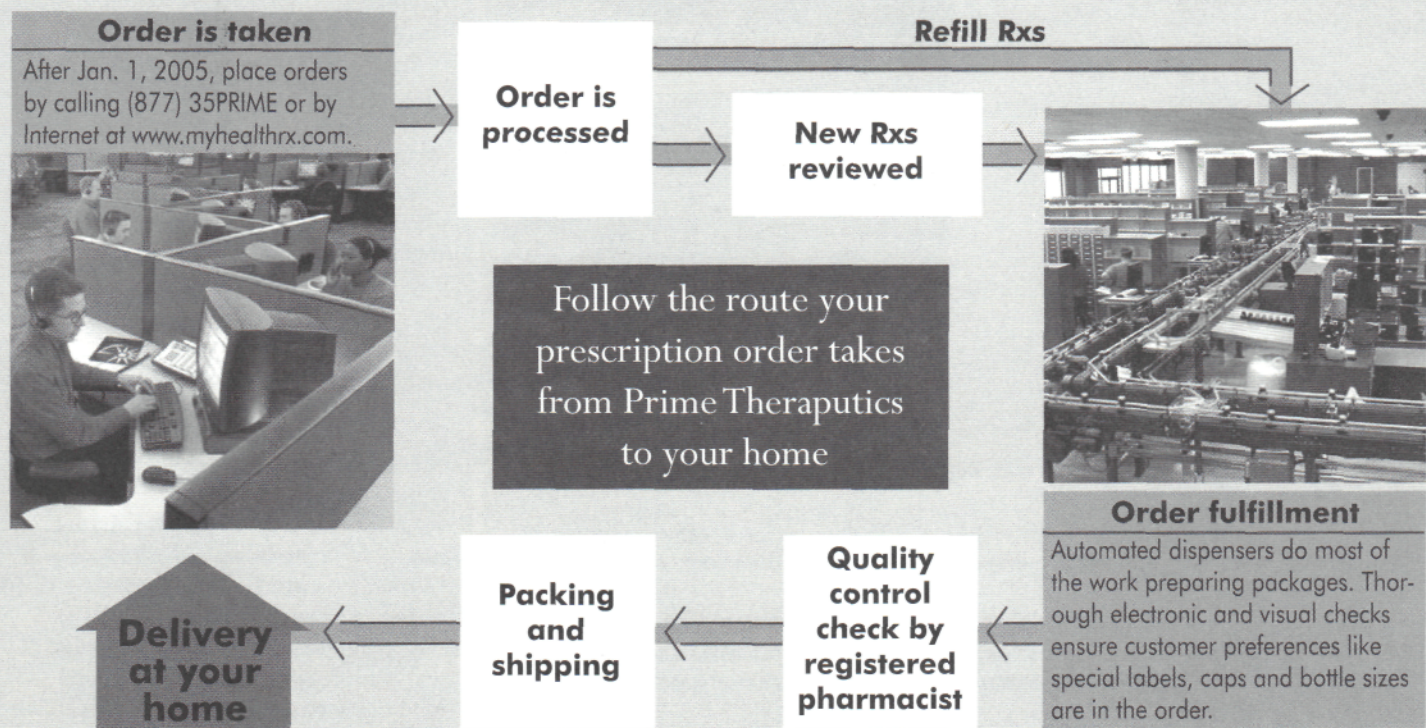
Mail-order benefits

Because personal data cannot be carried over from one pharmacy manager to another, members need to fill out new member profiles. Members can do this by visiting the pharmacy section of www.bcbstx.com and clicking on Prime Therapeutics; calling Prime's customer service, (877) 351-7403; or mailing a completed member and dependent history section of the mail-order form to Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Texas, c/o PrimeMail Pharmacy, P.O. Box 650041, Dallas, TX 75265-0041.

For Burton, the process should be seamless because all her drugs remain in the same formulary categories.

Refills are just a phone call away and the packages are delivered to the members' door, said Judy Kelley, vice president for mail services for Prime. Doctors or members should send in new prescriptions via postal mail.

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About 75 percent of faxes don't contain enough information on drug specifications or the patient, so the pharmacy has to contact the doctor or customer to get the rest of the information, Kelley said. On average, it takes 2.75 days to reach physicians or customers, delaying the time it takes for the prescription to be filled.

New medications will arrive in 10 to 14 days after Prime receives the order. Refills, which can be ordered by phone or the Internet, often leave the pharmacy the same day they are ordered.

Prime's automated pill dispensary system ensures the correct pills and quantity are dispensed for the correct prescription and that the new drug won't interact with other drugs the member is already taking, Kelley said.

Kelley said 9/11 changed the way Prime sends packages through the mail.

Prime is the first mail-order pharmacy to cap pill vials with an airtight, tamper-proof foil seal.

"With the Anthrax scare after 9/11, we started thinking we need to ensure that nobody has opened that bottle or done anything with it," Kelley said. "And the way to do that is with that seal."

The seal also protects the pills from spilling during the delivery process.

If a member has the time to wait for the drugs to arrive at the front door, it's certainly more convenient to use mail order, Burton said. And it's much cheaper.

"Unless you've used it, you really don't know how much you'll save," she said.

Prime Therapeutics primer

Headquarters: Egan, Minn.

Mail-order pharmacy facility: Irving.

Other locations: Omaha, Neb., and Chicago.

The mail-order pharmacy fills about 6,000 prescriptions per day. In January, that amount is expected to be 11,000.

The pharmacy has an accuracy rating of 99.95 percent, said Bernard Hukill, Prime's chief pharmacist.

Starting Jan. 1, 2005, visit myrxhealth.com or call, (877) 35PRIME to order a 90-day supply of drugs for the price of a 60-day supply.

Customer service hours: 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Messages can be left after hours.

New prescriptions usually arrive 10 to 14 days after Prime receives them; refills usually arrive two to five days after ordered.