

STICKER SHOCK

All provinces have public drug plans to provide some level of protection for people who otherwise might not buy the prescriptions they need. The provinces concluded long ago there is wisdom in paying for some, or most, prescription drug costs to avert the higher costs of deteriorating health.

Cancer drugs, with their enormous global research efforts, come to market with price tags considerably higher than other drugs. The sticker shock

causes provinces to forget what they already pay for everything else. Specifically, the low volume of cancer patients compared to the high volume of patients with other ailments means the total cost of cancer drugs is relatively modest.

To put these costs in context, CACC compiled this brief list of provincial drug plan expenditures in 2007 for the most commonly prescribed¹ drugs in Canada.

Ranking	Brand name (if no generics) or chemical name for multiple manufacturers	2007 Provincial Drug Plan Expenditures ² (Millions)	Indications
1	Lipitor	\$733.0	A statin; lowers bad cholesterol and raises good cholesterol; reduces risk of heart attack and stroke
2	levothyroxine	\$19.6	Thyroid hormone supplement
3	Norvasc	\$304.3	A calcium channel blocker; for high blood pressure and angina pain
4	acetylsalicylic acid	\$10.2	ASA relieves pain, fever, and inflammation
5	pantoprazole	\$107.8	A proton pump inhibitor; reduces stomach acid causing GERD; used with antibiotics to treat ulcers
6	Crestor	\$154.3	A statin; lowers bad cholesterol and raises good cholesterol; reduces risk of heart attack and stroke
7	ramipril	\$138.0	ACE inhibitors; for hypertension and congestive heart failure
8	Ratio-Salbutamol HFA	\$19.9 ³	A bronchodilator, CFC-free; for asthma, chronic bronchitis and other breathing disorders
9	furosemide	\$5.6	Diuretics: for fluid retention
10	Pariet	\$118.8	A proton pump inhibitor; to reduce stomach acid causing GERD; used with antibiotics to treat ulcers

To look at these costs from yet another perspective:

- In these eight provinces, drug plan expenditures for all proton pump inhibitors totaled \$610.7 million.
- Ontario's drug plan alone spent \$0.6 million on Tylenol 2, including the generic versions and the eight provinces in this data set spent \$8.5 million on all forms/dosages of acetaminophen+codeine+caffeine.
- The central provincial drug plans spent \$102.4 million on antiretrovirals (including NRTI, NNRTI and HIV fusion inhibitors) and protease inhibitors for the treatment of HIV/AIDS. This figure excludes numerous separate, provincially funded drug programs for HIV/AIDS.

Prescription drugs are necessary to maintain and restore health. Drugs for life threatening diseases tend to be more costly per unit than other drugs, but the volume of units varies. The top 10 drugs in this table account for 209 million prescriptions dispensed in 2007; cancer drugs are a tiny fraction of the total prescriptions in this country.

References

1. IMS Health, Canada, Compuscript: Pharmaceutical Trends; Top 10 dispensed medications by physician specialty, Canada, 2007; General Practice list. www.imshealthcanada.com
2. Brogan Inc.: Public expenditures, selected drugs, 2007; data available for eight provinces, excluding PEI and NL.
3. The requirement for asthma inhalers to be CFC-free had not yet come into effect, and a similar amount, \$21.9 million, was spent in 2007 for salbutamol sulfate.