



Healthcare Is Losing the Fight for Medication Affordability

Exploring technology's role in transforming medication price transparency



Introduction

Jillian V. lives with Crohn's disease, an inflammatory bowel disease that causes her immune system to attack healthy tissue in her intestinal tract. Since being diagnosed with the disease when she was 17, Jillian has frequently suffered abdominal pain and bouts of diarrhea so severe, she has struggled to keep up with work and graduate studies.

A year ago, Jillian was prescribed a biologic therapy that is also designed to treat ulcerative colitis, psoriatic arthritis and plaque psoriasis. "Within four weeks, I started to feel relief," she said. "Finally, my symptoms were under control. It was the first time in years that I'd felt good."

But the price tag for the drug runs at \$31,000 for a three-month treatment before insurance. With a 20% copay, Jillian feared she would be paying \$6,200 out of pocket every three months for treatment. "I just can't manage that type of expense. I don't know of many people who could," she said. "It's devastating to have finally found a drug that works, only to fear I can't afford it."

Across the industry, healthcare is losing the fight for medication affordability. And it's a battle that is felt by everyone.

Today, the burden of rising medication costs is forcing more families to make tough decisions around how—or if—they will manage their health. Medication non-adherence is the number one reason for poor outcomes, and with poor outcomes, costs rise for everyone—patients, providers, pharmacies, employers, payers, and more.

ACCORDING TO A 2025 KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION POLL:



1 out of 5

adults haven't filled a needed prescription due to medication costs



23%

opted for an over-the-counter alternative



1 out of 7

have reduced their dose to save money, cutting pills in half—or skipping doses altogether

1 out of 3 American adults have taken at least one of these cost-savings measures in the past year

Most at risk of taking shortcuts with their medications to save money: women and low-income individuals.

"The problem with the high prices of meds is out of control on every level. I don't care if you're rich or poor: Why are there so many levels in the prescription drug supply chain?"

—Lauran R., who lives with epilepsy, sharing her story with Truth in Rx

The State of Medication Affordability

Today, there's a disconnect between the trends in medication costs reported by pharmaceutical companies and what consumers feel at the pharmacy counter as they pay for their prescriptions.

In 2024, pharmacy spending jumped \$50 billion among commercial health plans year over year, according to a [PwC analysis](#). It's a trend fueled largely by the new wave of therapeutic drugs, including GLP-1s, hitting the market. As health plans scramble to control drug costs, consumers, too, feel the impact, with 42% saying they were [prescribed a medication they couldn't afford](#) in the past year.

Yet the narrative among pharmaceutical companies, told through their price transparency reports, would seem to indicate that the prices of drugs are barely increasing or are even decreasing. *How is this possible?*

Recently, [STAT News](#) examined the "transparency reports" that pharmaceutical companies have released over the past decade. Its analysis found that these reports don't disclose pricing information for specific drugs. This manipulates "the reality of how much Americans spend on prescription drugs," the article states.

Moreover, the pricing data in these reports isn't always weighted. That means a drug that is lower in cost, is prescribed to a lot of people, and offers minimal discounts for consumers is compared equally to a more expensive drug that isn't prescribed often and offers bigger discounts.

"Pharmaceutical companies' commitment to price transparency is facing a test right now, and it appears they'd prefer to keep the most valuable information in a black box," according to the article.

These companies are working hard to avoid price transparency regulations that have been enacted elsewhere in healthcare, like the regulatory standards hospitals face in disclosing costs for services and their payer-negotiated rates. But transparency around drug prices has never been harder to achieve.

For the first time in history, there are now four consumer prices for every drug:

1. The copay price set by insurance, which might actually be higher than the true cost of the drug itself—especially if the drug is a generic drug

2. The copay coupon price

3. The cash price, available to consumers without insurance and those who agree not to use their insurance to purchase a medication

4. The direct-to-consumer price that consumers pay when they purchase a drug directly from the manufacturer

Research shows that cost-related medication non-adherence—experienced by [one out of five seniors alone](#)—worsens patient outcomes, increases hospitalizations, prolongs illness, and contributes to [billions in avoidable healthcare costs](#) each year.

What's needed: Transparency in medication costs and cost-savings alternatives that is as easy to access as options for renting a movie through various streaming services.

Uncovering More Options for Medication Affordability

Today, pharma manufacturer copay coupons are the least talked about cost savings opportunity for consumers.

Copay coupons represent a **\$30 billion opportunity to reduce medication costs** for consumers per year. They work by reducing consumers' out-of-pocket costs for medications at the point of purchase from a pharmacy.

Typically, drug manufacturers provide copay coupons for high-cost or specialty medications. It's a way to encourage use of these medications by making it easier for consumers to afford them.

The number of copay coupons—and their potential impact on medication affordability—is growing (see the exhibit at right). **But fewer than 10% of these coupons are ever redeemed.** That's a missed savings for consumers and a missed opportunity for healthcare to put medication expense relief into the hands of those who need it most.

A Missed Opportunity for Medication Affordability

	2024	2025
Brand-name medications that provide a copay coupon:	1,214	1,298
Total copay coupons:	1,689	1,786

More than \$30 billion in copay coupons for high-cost and specialty drugs exist for consumers—but fewer than 10% are ever used.

For example, in the case of Jillian, who suffers from Crohn's disease, a copay coupon offered through the drug manufacturer could bring her out-of-pocket cost down to just \$5 per dose after commercial insurance is applied. "It's a game changer," she said. "I can't imagine how I'd afford this treatment without it. It's given me my life back."

Availability of Copay Coupons for Top 15 Conditions

Category	Copay Coupons
Cancer	196
Dermatology	121
Diabetes	106
Women's Health	77
Mental Health	75
Gastrointestinal	57
Eye	52
Genetic Disorders	52
Bone/Joint/Muscle	50
Pain	48
Autoimmune Disease	46
Respiratory Health	45
Kidney Disease	30
Cardiovascular Disease	28
Asthma/Allergies	23

In instances where copay coupons are available, the potential savings can be substantial. One study found that copay coupons, when applied, **covered 85% of the cost of the drug.**

So why don't more consumers redeem copay coupons?

Two reasons stand out:

Lack of awareness.

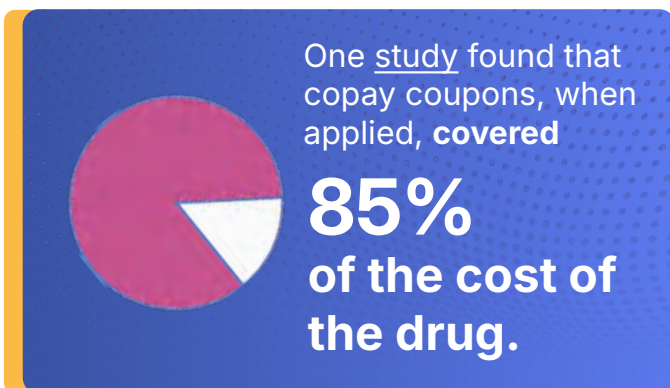
It isn't just that consumers aren't aware that copay coupons for brand-name medications exist. Those who do know about these coupons are often confused about their options—and how to access them—in an era when prescription cash discount programs have flooded the healthcare ecosystem.

"There are so many drug discount programs available. Which one is best for me?" a consumer may think. Meanwhile, at a time when the options for copay coupons are rapidly growing, physicians and pharmacists often aren't aware that new coupons are available. They also don't have the time to search and manually help consumers navigate their options.

Breakdowns in digital access.

The technology that supports medication transactions is designed to facilitate drug transactions and the secure exchange of patient information among healthcare providers, pharmacies and health plans. It hasn't been wired to serve consumers, either in the form of prescription drug price transparency or the availability of copay coupons to offset out-of-pocket medication costs. In fact, until a consumer gets to the pharmacy counter, that person typically will not know:

- If the medication is covered by their insurance
- The price of the medication after insurance has been applied
- The self-pay price (how much the consumer can expect to pay for the medication if they decide to pay completely out of pocket to receive a self-pay discount)
- The alternative options available, from medication alternatives (generic vs. other brand-name drugs, for example) or the alternative for a cheaper options at another pharmacy
- The cost to the consumer if the medication were purchased directly from the pharmaceutical manufacturer



But the current digital infrastructure for pharmacies isn't set up to put this data in the hands of consumers quickly. It also leaves healthcare providers, health plans, and even pharmacists in the dark about the cost-savings options available to make medications more affordable and therefore easier to access, supporting better health and lower healthcare costs for all.

Putting this information in the hands of consumers before they reach the pharmacy counter requires that every stakeholder in the patient journey—from physicians to health systems, health plans, employers,

pharmacists, pharmacy benefit managers, consumer health apps and more—be digitally connected to options for medication affordability in real time. In an era of increased interoperability and artificial intelligence, overcoming the systems and workflows that have long impeded medication price transparency is now within reach.

It's time to rewire digital pharmacy tech to work for the consumer—starting with uncovering information and options for medication affordability at the consumer and pharmacist level.

Key Actions for an Affordability Rx

How can the healthcare industry take a tech-forward approach to supporting medication price transparency for improved affordability? Here are four places to start.

1. Set the stage for technology to help cure financial toxicity in healthcare. In an era of patient-directed healthcare, financial toxicity will continue to drive up costs and hurt outcomes until we stop ignoring the inevitable: If a person can't afford a drug, they aren't going to take the drug.

As interoperability between healthcare systems becomes easier to achieve with AI and new infrastructure investments, the healthcare industry must prioritize digital pathways that make information regarding options for medication affordability available to every stakeholder in the patient journey. This includes consumers, pharmacists, pharmacy benefit managers, physicians, health systems, employers, and consumer health apps.

When the right information is easily accessible through multiple touchpoints in real time, this bolsters the ability to make the right decisions for the individual—including around medication costs.

2. Implement a price transparency calculator at the point of care. Just as hospitals are now required to provide an out-of-pocket price estimator tool or payer-specific negotiated rates, it's time for consumers to have real-time access to all drug pricing options. Such a tool would allow consumers to know:

- How much they can expect to pay out of pocket for the medication their physician has prescribed, including options with manufacturer coupons
- Whether there is an alternative brand-name or generic medication that could provide a similar result while reducing medication costs
- The lowest-cost options that exist for obtaining the medications they need—and how to access those options

A tool such as this gives consumers details they need to make informed decisions around their prescriptions and associated costs. It also helps avoid emotional distress at the point of purchase and helps avert instances where a patient decides not to fill a prescription or takes a lower dose than recommended to avoid a medication expense.

3. Incorporate an electronic tool for drug coupon access within the pharmacy's electronic processing system. Ideally, this would be implemented by a vendor that would integrate the tool within the pharmacy management system that is used at the point of sale. This aggregated database of pharmacy copay coupons—available through a real-time API—would act as a dynamic map to the \$30 billion in patient savings available nationally through the use of copay coupons. It's a tool that would keep cash in consumers' pockets by lowering or eliminating their drug expenses—and protect access to the medications they need, when they need them.

4. Include a best-price calculator in member engagement tools. For health plans and employers, this presents an important opportunity for members to compare costs for their prescription medications at in-network pharmacies. It also gives members the chance to explore other options with their provider when a specific drug isn't covered—long before they reach the pharmacy counter. Some major health plans enable members to import their entire list of prescription medications into a cost estimator tool at once, reducing time spent searching for the information they need.

By deploying tech solutions that increase medication transparency and affordability, the healthcare industry can dramatically reduce the fear and frustration that often accompany a trip to the pharmacy. It's a move that would strengthen equity in medication access while paving the way for improved outcomes for all.

Our mission is to save people money on prescription medications. RxUtility is the only platform to connect healthcare providers, pharmacists and digital health partners at the point of prescribing and pick-up with real-time manufacturer copay assistance. By embedding prescription cost savings in provider, pharmacy and consumer workflows, RxUtility offers patients transparency into their cost options. When people can afford the medications they need, adherence improves, and satisfaction scores go up. We're helping to create a world that ensures equitable access to prescription drugs.