

with **THE PLAIN DEALER**

**Free drug samples from a doctor sound good, but they may be too new and too expensive**

by [Diane Suchetka, The Plain Dealer](#)

**Tuesday September 08, 2009, 9:00 AM**

It's time we resurrected the anti-drug slogan "Just Say No" -- this time to protect us from a different menace: the one lurking in our doctors' cupboards of free samples.

Why say no to something that can treat an illness, save a trip to the drugstore and doesn't cost a dime? What's not to like about that?

Two not-so-little things.

The first is this: The samples drug reps give to doctors are typically the newest drugs out there.

"And this is not to scare your readers," says Lisa Gill, editor of Prescription Drugs, a health information Web site run by Consumer Reports. "But when a new drug hits the market, we don't know what the long-term effects are."

That doesn't mean they're not safe, says Allan Coukell, director of the Pew Prescription Project, a program of the Pew Charitable Trusts that promotes drug safety. "We just don't know the whole story."

Some side effects don't surface until a very large number of people have taken a drug for months or years.

And that doesn't happen until *after* a drug is approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

The FDA decides to approve a drug based on tests by the manufacturer, which are typically done on about 3,000 people who take it for six to 12 weeks, says Dr. John Abramson, clinical instructor at Harvard Medical School and author of "Overdosed America: The Broken Promise of American Medicine."

After they're approved, sales reps hit doctors' offices to tell them how wonderful the new drugs are. Then they load them up with samples that they pass on to thousands of patients across the country.

So taking samples most likely means you're getting a drug early in its life.

"In essence," says Dr. Edward Jardini, "you have become a lab rat."

Jardini is author of the book "How to Save on Prescription Drugs," and a family-practice doctor in California who refuses to accept free samples.

He, along with Gill and Abramson, suggest that patients never take samples without first asking if there's a generic alternative -- a trusted drug that's been on the market for years -- that's less expensive. A generic can't be made until the patent runs out on the original, which takes years.

"It's much better to take a proven, time-tested medication that's safer," says Jardini.

Vioxx is a good reminder of the serious problems new drugs can cause.

Tens of thousands of people had heart attacks or strokes after taking the arthritis and pain drug. About 50,000 of them -- or their families -- sued Merck, which agreed to pay \$4.85 billion to settle those cases.

The second reason to say no to samples: your wallet.

"As we say around here, 'There's no such thing as a free lunch,' " says Gill.

Jardini agrees.

"Your doctor does not have samples of every available drug," he writes in his book. "He only has the ones the drug companies would like him to prescribe -- the ones that give them the biggest profit."

Free drugs are just like free samples at the grocery store.

You don't see those clerks and their electric frying pans handing out tidbits of inexpensive, generic fried shrimp. It's the expensive, brand-name stuff.

The hope is that you'll take the bait and buy the product, not just this week, but lots of weeks and for years to come.

And if you think the higher price doesn't really hurt because you have insurance, you might want to reconsider.

Even if your insurance plan covers the drug and all you have to shell out is a co-pay, you're probably spending too much. That's because generics typically have lower co-pays or are available through the \$4 programs many stores offer.

And you're hurting the rest of us, too.

"Eventually, the cost gets passed onto the entire group with higher premiums," Gill says. "So we all pay in the end."

The other problem is that while you're sitting in the doctor's office taking those samples, you probably don't know if the drug he's giving you is on your insurance company's formulary, the list of drugs it agrees to cover. If it's not, your co-pay could more than double.

And that can create even bigger problems.

When costs get too high, many patients end up cutting pills in half, taking them every other day or not taking them at all. They can get sicker, end up in emergency rooms and drive up health-care costs even more.

As Gill says: "You're far more likely to take your drugs if you can afford them."

So what should you do when your doctor hands you a bag of free samples?

Ask if a change in lifestyle -- diet or exercise, for example -- will do the trick instead, Abramson says.

If not, then ask if there's a low-cost alternative that will work just as well.

"You should always ask that," Jardini says.

If there is a generic, tell your doctor or pharmacist that's what you want. And if cost is a concern, make sure you bring that up.

As Jardini says: If you can't afford it, it won't do you any good.

Another good piece of advice is to take your insurance company's approved list of drugs with you, so you know what will be covered before your doctor writes a prescription.

But don't forget this: There are times when a new drug is exactly what you need.

"And if it's truly the best drug," Coukell says, "then there's no harm in taking it."

In that case, go ahead and accept the samples. You should also say "yes" to freebies if they're a drug you only need for a limited time -- antibiotics for an infection, for example.

But remember that serious side effects caused by any medication should quickly be reported to your doctor. Chances are good another medication out there will work without causing problems.

And while you're at it, contact the FDA about any serious reactions you have to your medicine. It has set up a special telephone line, 1-800-332-1088, just to take these kinds of reports.

If the FDA doesn't know about complications, it can't warn the rest of us about them.

And those warnings save lives.