

Free Lipitor, Viagra, other drugs for jobless

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FILE - In this Jan. 25, 2009 file photo, a bottle of Pfizer's Lipitor is shown in New York. Drugmaker Pfizer Inc. is unveiling a new program, Thursday, May 14, 2009, that will let people who have lost their jobs and health insurance keep taking their Pfizer medications _ for free, and for up to a year. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, file)

(AP) -- Pfizer Inc. is unveiling a new program Thursday that will let people who have lost their jobs and health insurance keep taking some widely prescribed Pfizer medications - including Lipitor and Viagra - for free for up to a year.

The world's biggest drugmaker will provide more than 70 of its

[prescription drugs](#) at no cost to unemployed, uninsured Americans, regardless of their prior income, who lost jobs since Jan. 1 and have been on the Pfizer [drug](#) for three months or more.

The announcement comes amid massive job losses caused by the recession and a campaign in Washington to rein in [health care](#) costs and extend coverage. The move could earn Pfizer some goodwill in that debate after long being a target of critics of drug industry prices and sales practices.

The program also likely will help keep those patients loyal to Pfizer brands.

"Everybody knows now a neighbor, a relative who has lost their job and is losing their insurance. People are definitely hurting out there," Dr. Jorge Puente, Pfizer's head of pharmaceuticals outside the U.S. and Europe and a champion of the project, told The Associated Press in an exclusive interview Wednesday. "Our aim is to help people bridge this point."

Officials for New York-based Pfizer said they don't know how much the program will cost and haven't put a cap on spending for it.

Applicants will have to sign a statement that they are suffering financial hardship and provide a "pink slip" or similar employer notice. Applications will be accepted through Dec. 31, with medication provided for up to 12 months after approval - or until the person becomes insured again.

Starting Thursday, patients can call a toll-free number, 866-706-2400, to sign up, and those whose drugs are not included in the program will be referred to other company aid programs. Starting July 1, patients can also apply through the Web site, <http://www.PfizerHelpfulAnswers.com>

, which has information about the other Pfizer aid programs.

Pfizer and the rest of the drug industry is trying to have a voice in the debate over how to overhaul the U.S. health care system, partly by joining in a pledge this week to help hold down inflation of health costs.

"There's a long-term benefit there, beyond the goodwill and the publicity," said David Heupel, health care portfolio manager at Thrivent Large Cap Growth Fund. "Pfizer is trying to maintain their (market) share, if not grow their share" by keeping people from switching to generic versions of its drugs to save money.

"If you're already taking medication that's working, typically doctors don't push to change it," Heupel said.

Pfizer's program comes at a time when many drugmakers, including Pfizer, have been raising prices on their drugs, partly to offset declines in revenue as the global [recession](#) reduces the number of prescriptions people can afford to fill.

The idea for the program came just five weeks ago, at a leadership training meeting, as the workers discussed how many patients are struggling, Puente said.

"It was my idea," he said. "I floated it, and the reception it got was so dramatic that it very quickly became our idea."

Colleagues suggested employees could donate to a fund to help support the effort, Puente said. He said some employees had tears in their eyes when discussing how they could help people who had lost jobs.

He said he urged top management to approve the program, presenting a recent Associated Press article about how newly uninsured diabetics are

suffering serious complications because they can no longer afford the medicines and testing supplies. Approval came quickly.

The 70-plus drugs covered include several diabetes drugs and some of Pfizer's top money makers, from cholesterol fighter Lipitor and painkiller Celebrex to fibromyalgia treatment Lyrica and Viagra for impotence. The list includes drugs from several other popular classes, including antibiotics, antidepressants, antifungal treatments, several heart drugs, contraceptives and smoking cessation products. Cheaper generic versions are available for quite a few of the drugs.

Pfizer said that from 2004 through 2008, its patient assistance programs helped 5.1 million people get 51 million [Pfizer](#) prescriptions for free or at reduced cost, with a total value of \$4.8 billion.

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