

## New medical card prescription charge

The Department of Health introduced a 50 cent charge for each prescription item dispensed to medical card holders from October 1<sup>st</sup> 2010. The charge will apply to all items prescribed on the medical card by your GP.

### Against the Department of Health's own advice

Prior to introducing this charge, Health Minister, Mary Harney commissioned an expert group called "Resource allocation and financing in the health sector" that specifically came out against the charge. Unfortunately Minister Harney decided not to listen to her own experts. This charge hits the most vulnerable in society including the elderly, homeless and those with addiction problems. The fear is that while the charge is very low, it will lead to some people not filling their prescriptions and taking essential medicines. If people fail to take essential medicines their illness will worsen and they will ultimately cost the health service more as they will have to be admitted to hospital to undergo expensive treatments. International research has found this to be the case. In the last few months, Northern Ireland and Wales have abolished prescription charges for all patients. The theory is that giving free access to prescription medication will cost the health service less in the long term due to the prevention of serious illnesses.

The need to reduce health costs is understood by everyone. However it is felt by medical experts that the HSE should be reducing costs in other ways such as allowing pharmacists to substitute less expensive but equally effective generic medication for medical card patients. This would save the state a lot more than it saves with this charge and will not impact on patients' health.

### Who doesn't have to pay the charge?

Exemptions from the 50c charge is children in the care of the HSE who have their own medical card. This includes children in residential care, foster care, foster care with relatives and other care placements. Methadone supplied to patients participating under the Methadone Treatment Scheme is also exempt from the 50c charge.

### Is there any way out of paying the charge?

Apart from the few exceptions above, there is no way of avoiding the charge. The prescription levy requirement was introduced into legislation on July 7<sup>th</sup> 2010 by the Health (Amendment) (No. 2) Act 2010 (No.20 of 2010) which states that the pharmacist is legally obliged to collect the charge from the patient. The law states that a pharmacist cannot exempt a patient from the charge by way of special offer or inducement. Put simply, if a pharmacist fails to collect the charge, they will be deemed to be breaking the law and the HSE will take legal action against the pharmacist. The HSE have stated that patients who are homeless and resident in nursing homes must also pay the charge.

If you have a medical card, this means that when you take your prescription to the pharmacist, you will be charged 50c for each item of medicine you receive. This 50c will contribute toward the cost of your medicines, and the HSE will continue to pay the rest of the cost. As well as normal medical card prescriptions, the charge will also apply to Hospital Emergency Prescriptions, Dental Prescriptions under the Dental Treatment Scheme, the EEA Scheme and Hardship prescriptions. However, the 50c charge does not apply to the Long Term Illness Scheme or the Drugs Payment Scheme.

### **Max amount**

Some people or families may get a number of items prescribed for them, but no person or family will be liable to pay more than €10 per month. A family is you, your spouse/partner and your children under 21 who are in full-time education. According to the Department of Health, those who exceed the monthly fee ceiling will have to apply for a refund from the HSE. To obtain your refund, apply on [www.medicalcard.ie](http://www.medicalcard.ie) or at the local HSE Health Centre.

### **How do I know what my charge will be?**

You simply count the number of items prescribed by your GP on your prescription by 50c. So if you are prescribed 3 items you will be charged €1.50 by your pharmacist. However, if for example you are on a high dose of a drug, meaning that you need two packs of the drug to finish the course prescribed, you will only pay one charge. For example, if you are diabetic and your doctor prescribes 100 blood glucose test strips, your charge will only be 50c even though you will receive 2 packs (50 in each box). This is because the doctor only prescribed one item and two packs of the same item is needed to fulfill the prescription. There is an exemption to this rule. If you need two strengths of the same drug you will have to pay two charges. An example of this would be a prescription for warfarin 4mg tablets daily for the month.

You will need 30 warfarin 1mg tablets and 30 warfarin 3mg tablets to fulfill this prescription as there is no such thing as warfarin 4mg tablets. Therefore the HSE will expect you to pay two charges. Your pharmacist will inform you how much the charge will be.

### **What if someone cannot afford to pay the levy?**

The HSE advises that patients who cannot afford to pay the charge should contact their medical card section on 1890-252-919.