



**National Employer Initiative  
on Specialty Drugs**  
*Employer Focused, Employer Driven*



## Frequently Asked Questions

### *Specialty Drugs: What You Need to Know*

#### What are specialty drugs and why are they important?

Biologic or “specialty drugs” may be prescribed to someone with a complex, chronic or rare health condition. They are the result of advances in research and technology and are designed to improve the health of people with previously untreatable or life-threatening conditions. A few even have the capacity to cure or nearly cure disease.

#### How are they different from conventional drugs?

- Specialty drugs come in many different forms such as pills, vaccines, insulin and gene therapies
- They are often more expensive than conventional drugs
- They vary in how they are administered to the patient – many are given intravenously in an outpatient setting while some can be self-injected and others come in oral form
- Many require special handling and storage such as refrigeration
- Although retail pharmacies like your neighborhood drug store can provide some specialty drugs, most are dispensed through high-touch specialty pharmacies
- These “special” pharmacies employ health professionals trained to handle the complex process needed to support people on these drugs, including ongoing monitoring to make sure the dosing is sufficient, the drug is working as expected and, if side effects are present, they are well managed

#### Which diseases respond well to specialty drugs?

Specialty drugs are used to treat many diseases and conditions, such as multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, some cancers, HIV/AIDS, hepatitis C, asthma, COPD, cystic fibrosis, immune deficiency and seizures/epilepsy. An increasing number of specialty drugs focus on chronic diseases, especially for patients who have not seen improvement in their condition on conventional drugs.

## Why do specialty drugs cost more?

Conventional drugs are made through chemical synthesis, are fairly easy to manufacture and often less expensive to produce. Specialty drugs are manufactured in a living system using human, plant or animal cells, making research and development more complex. These drugs often take 6-10 years to research and develop and then must be approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). All of this adds to the cost of bringing a specialty drug to you.

## What type of financial assistance is available?

Many drug manufacturers offer financial assistance programs. Doctors, pharmacists or case managers may be able to assist you in contacting the manufacturer to determine eligibility requirements. In addition, support information can often be obtained through the web site of a specific drug manufacturer. Check with your pharmacy benefits provider to see whether outside financial assistance can be used with your current benefits.

## Who should be on your health care team?

Managing a complex illness involves the help and support of many people, including family and friends. Use the resources around you – doctors, nurses, case managers, your insurance company, pharmacists and pharmacies (including specialty pharmacies, which are uniquely qualified to support people on specialty drugs) – to get the best results from your drug therapy and improve your quality of life while on a treatment plan.

## Why is it important to follow your doctor's treatment plan?

When your treatment plan includes specialty drugs, it is critical that you follow it closely to get the best possible results. If you are unable to take the medicine in the exact manner prescribed, immediately contact your doctor to discuss next steps. Skipping doses or abruptly ending treatment can be dangerous to your health and may even result in the need to start the entire course of treatment over, resulting in much higher costs for your care. For some diseases and conditions, you may need to try more than one specialty drug in order to find the one that best meets your medical needs. Your doctor may also request genetic testing to determine if the drug prescribed will work effectively for you.

## What can you do to achieve the best results?

- Learn about your disease and ask questions about side effects, long-term outcomes, how much the therapy costs, what other drugs are available and what happens if you don't take the drug.
- Understand the treatment plan, including when and how to take the drug to maximize effectiveness. Make sure you understand if it needs to be refrigerated, what the right dose is and what happens if you don't take the drug as prescribed. Ask questions if you're unsure.

- Follow your doctor's instructions and if you can't do this on your own, enlist the help of a family member or friend.
- Tell your doctor about any drugs you are currently taking, including non-prescription supplements, to avoid drug interactions.
- Talk with your doctor about any side effects you experience. Depending on the drug, some side effects are expected and will end after a period of time, while others might be a sign that the drug is not right for you. In some cases, there are medicines that can bring relief.
- Take advantage of health education and social support. Use resources offered by your health care team to help you get the most from your treatment. Tap into support groups for assistance from others experiencing your disease and related treatments.

## How can you most effectively use your prescription drug benefit?

In order to get the most out of your health care and pharmacy benefits:

- Learn as much as you can about what is available through your company, including what drugs and treatments are covered, what drugs are excluded from your plan, and what pre-authorization requirements, if any, are necessary in order to receive a drug.
- Understand how to use your pharmacy benefits, including what a drug formulary is, how prior authorization and step therapy work and what your out-of-pocket costs are for the drug.

Good information and reliable resources are important if you are faced with treatment decisions related to a chronic, complex or life-threatening disease or condition, especially if a specialty drug is prescribed by your doctor.