

Time to switch drugstores?

If you're among the 47 percent of Americans who get medicine from drugstore giants such as CVS, Eckerd, and Rite Aid, here's a prescription: Try shopping somewhere else. The best place to start looking is one of the 25,000 independent pharmacies that are making a comeback throughout the U.S.

Independent stores, which were edging toward extinction a few years ago, won top honors from *Consumer Reports* readers, besting the big chains by an eye-popping margin. More than 85 percent of customers at independent drugstores were very satisfied or completely satisfied with their experience, compared with 58 percent of chain-drugstore customers.

Many supermarket and mass-merchant pharmacies also did a better job than the best-known conventional chains at providing caring, courteous, knowledgeable, and timely service. And in a nationwide price study we conducted, the chains we evaluated charged the highest prices--even slightly more than the independents.

Those findings come from our latest investigation into the best places to shop for prescription medications. More than 32,000 readers told us about more than 40,000 experiences at 31 national and regional drugstore chains (like CVS, Genovese, Osco, Rite Aid, and Walgreens); supermarket-pharmacy combos (such as Kroger, Publix, and Safeway); mass-merchant pharmacies (like Costco, Target, and Wal-Mart); and independent pharmacies across the nation.

For most consumers, insurance covers at least some of the cost of prescription drugs, so our [Ratings](#) emphasize service factors that affect everyone. For consumers who have to pay more than a small percentage of their prescription-drug costs, including more than a third of our readers, our price study indicated where to save money. (See [Where to shop, how to save.](#))

Among the other highlights of our research:

- Some of the drugstore chains and supermarkets that readers favored are family owned or businesses in which workers have a stake. Medicine Shoppe, the top "chain," is actually a collection of about 1,000 individually owned and operated stores with a common parent company. Among supermarkets, high-rated Wegmans (in New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania) is family owned; and at high-rated Publix (in the South), most workers are stockholders.
- Forty percent of readers said that at least once during the past year, their drugstore was out of the medicine they needed.
- Our market basket of a month's worth of five widely prescribed medications cost \$377 to \$555, depending on where we shopped. For a family needing all five drugs, that difference would exceed \$2,000 a year.

SORTING OUT THE STORES

Most people start by searching for a store that accepts their insurance plan. Fortunately, that isn't the hassle it used to be, especially since independents are accepting more plans these days. Insurers once considered the disparate stores too much trouble to work with, but they realized that keeping independents out of their networks alienated customers and didn't cut costs as much as they'd hoped. Also, 33 states have adopted "any willing provider" laws, which require insurance companies to take into their networks any pharmacy that's willing to accept the insurer's reimbursement rate. As a result, you have a greater choice of where and how to shop. The basic choices:

Independents: Service is all. Prescription drugs are the independents' lifeblood, accounting for 88 percent of sales. That means independents can be a good source of hard-to-find medications. (The chains, where drugs account for 64 percent of sales, tend to focus on the 200 most-prescribed drugs.)

That focus on prescriptions can mean more personal attention. Readers said that pharmacists at independent stores were accessible, approachable, and easy to talk to, and that they were especially knowledgeable about medications, both prescription and nonprescription.

The independents (and some chains) offer extras such as disease-management education, in-store health screenings for cholesterol, services such as compounding (customizing medications for patients with special needs), and home delivery.

Many independents are affiliated with programs such as Good Neighbor or Value-Rite, whose names you'll see in the stores. These "banner" programs, offered by wholesale product suppliers, help independents with marketing and with the sale of private-label products, improving purchasing power and name recognition much the way ServiStar and True Value help small hardware stores compete with Home Depot and Lowe's.

About half of the nation's independents have Web sites, where you can generally order medicine and find some health information but not much more.

Chains: Convenient but crowded. With about 20,000 stores nationwide, mega-drugstores are in nearly everyone's backyard. Many are open around the clock, have a drive-through pharmacy for faster pickup, and let you order online or by punching a few numbers on a telephone. You can even set up your Web account to have renewals automatically processed and readied for pickup or mailing. The biggest chains let you check prices online. Another advantage: The chains accept payment from lots of health plans (managed care pays for 80 percent of all conventional-chain prescriptions).

Now for the drawbacks. The chains' locations in populous areas and their acceptance of a plethora of plans has made them, in effect, too popular, and service is suffering. Except for Medicine Shoppe, chains typically made readers wait longer, were slower to fill orders, and provided less personal attention than other types of drugstores.

Like other drugstores, the chains have experienced shrinking reimbursement from insurers. They've helped maintain profits by selling everything from milk to Halloween costumes. That makes one-stop shopping possible (if your list isn't too specific), but it also can create bottlenecks at the checkout.

Supermarkets: One stop does it. There are fewer than 9,000 supermarkets that include a pharmacy, but the number is rising. One-stop shopping is the attraction. Many supermarkets put the pharmacy near the entrance for easy access and to attract store traffic. For those very reasons, however, you may not have as much privacy to consult with the druggist as you would elsewhere.

Supermarkets have online pharmacy sites, usually as a link from the home page, but they're often less comprehensive than those of big drugstore chains.

Mass merchants: Low price is key. Like supermarkets, these stores sell a wide variety of goods. But their main draw is low prices. One in five readers who bought medication from a mass merchant had no prescription-drug coverage. In our price study, only Web sites sold medications as cheaply. In our survey, ShopKo and Target were among the high-rated mass merchants; Wal-Mart was worse than most others.

All of the mass merchants in our survey have Web sites for ordering prescriptions, but only the Costco site lets you check drug prices.

Online: Low prices, no face time. Virtual pharmacies come in two basic flavors. There are adjuncts to brick-

and-mortar stores, where you can order online and receive your prescription by mail or pick it up. Then there are sites such as www.drugstore.com and www.aarppharmacy.com, which have no store and simply mail the medicine to you. With both types of site, you can enter the name and quantity of the drug online; a pharmacist will confirm the prescription with your doctor. (Often, you can fax or mail a paper prescription instead and wait for it to be approved, but that can add days to the process.)

Anytime you're not picking up from a pharmacist, you lose a chance for personal contact, a consideration if you're using a medication for the first time or are juggling medications. To compensate, the stand-alone Web sites--and those operated by the drug chains and some mass merchants--make it easy to e-mail questions to pharmacists 24/7, research medical topics, search online for potentially dangerous drug interactions, receive e-mail refill reminders, keep track of your medications, and note any drug allergies. Drugstore.com will also alert you if the branded drug you're taking becomes available in generic form.

It can take as little as a couple of hours for your medicine to be ready if you order from a chain and are willing to retrieve it, or as long as three to five business days if you ask for it to be mailed standard shipping. That's free or nearly so. You can pay about \$15 to have medicine overnighted (refrigerated medicines must be sent that way). Web sites can't ship every controlled substance.

When you use a Web site, you can avoid waiting in line, of course, and you'll tend to pay lower prices, even when shipping costs are included. No computer? No problem. Sites have toll-free numbers.

Four percent of our readers had bought medications online, most often from drug chains, and three-quarters of those said the transaction went smoothly: Their order was processed quickly enough for their needs, and e-mailed questions were answered promptly. (For details on ordering via the Web, see [The online option](#).)

GETTING BETTER SERVICE

Some stores did far better than others in service, speed, and information provided by the druggist. The most frequent complaints: Drugs were out of stock, readers had to wait a long time for service at the pharmacy counter, and prescriptions weren't ready.

Drugstore chains and supermarkets were most likely to be out of a requested drug. When a drug was out of stock, independents were able to obtain it within one day 80 percent of the time, vs. about 55 to 60 percent for the other types of stores. Only 9 percent of the time did independent customers have to wait at least three days for an out-of-stock drug or find it elsewhere, vs. at least 18 percent of the time for other types of stores.

Drugs were out of stock more often this time than when we published our last drugstore survey, in 1999. The steepest jump took place at Albertsons, Giant, and Longs Drugs, whose out-of-stocks increased by more than 15 percentage points. That's probably the case in part because the number of prescriptions being written is growing faster than the shelf space.

Overall, 27 percent of readers complained about long waits. It's no wonder. Pharmacists fill nearly 4 billion prescriptions a year, an average of almost 200 per day for each pharmacist, and spend one-fourth of their time on administrative work such as calling doctors and dealing with insurance companies. Moreover, there's a shortage of druggists--there are approximately 5,500 job openings around the U.S. At CVS, Genovese, Longs Drugs, and Sav-On, about 40 percent of readers complained of long waits for service. Lines were short at Medicine Shoppe (only 6 percent of readers complained) and at the independents (8 percent).

Twenty percent of readers overall said that their prescription wasn't ready when promised. Among the worst offenders: CVS, Genovese, and Rite Aid, where prescriptions weren't ready nearly one-third of the time. Better-prepared stores included Medicine Shoppe, Publix, ShopKo, Winn-Dixie, and the independents.

Other complaints focused on how pharmacists interact with customers. Worst offenders: the drugstore chains,

where 10 percent of readers said they did not receive enough personal attention from their pharmacist. Best: You guessed it --the independents--where only 2 percent of readers found fault.

Service may improve in all stores, eventually. In many states, regulators are giving technicians more authority to assist druggists. Technology is also lending a hand in the form of robotic machines that dispense medications. They do everything but cap the bottle (which goes uncapped to the pharmacist for a final inspection).

Although only a small fraction of doctors are now writing e-prescriptions, they are the wave of the future. Doctors use a handheld device to transmit your prescription to the drugstore. The procedure avoids one of druggists' biggest problems and a contributor to the rising incidence of drug errors: deciphering doctors' handwriting.

While waiting for the future, you might improve the odds of getting good service now by patronizing an independent pharmacy. But whatever drugstore you use, you're apt to get better service by following some simple advice:

Avoid waiting. Order drugs online or by phone, then pick them up (or, if you're not in a rush, have them mailed). If you plan to pick up drugs, check from home whether the doctor and druggist have connected and the prescription is ready.

Establish a good relationship. Make sure you can step aside and talk privately with the pharmacist and that you can reach him or her by phone. The pharmacist should volunteer details about the drug and be able to answer questions about nonprescription products, too. With online pharmacies, make sure you receive prompt, thorough answers to questions submitted by e-mail.

Get good advice. Check that the pharmacy keeps and updates your medication records, which should reduce the risk of a drug conflict or adverse reaction. Don't walk away from the counter without knowing the following: what to do if you miss a dose; how many refills are permitted; how to store the drug and when it expires; what side effects to expect, along with which to ignore and which to contact your doctor about; and foods, drugs, supplements, or situations to avoid while taking the medication.

Ratings Pharmacies

To most people, whose drug bills are covered by insurance, factors such as service, speed, and thorough information matter most. Stores that did especially well at pleasing readers in those areas include independent pharmacies; Medicine Shoppe, a "chain" of individually owned stores; the mass merchants ShopKo and Target; and the regional supermarkets Publix, Wegmans, and Winn-Dixie. If price is most important to you, buy medicine at a mass merchant or online. If convenience is key, try a mass merchant or supermarket (for one-stop shopping) or a Web site (you needn't leave home if you order online and are willing to have your medication shipped).

Guide to the Survey

The Ratings are based on more than 32,000 responses to our 2002 Annual Questionnaire, reflecting more than 40,000 experiences buying prescription drugs at brick-and-mortar independent, chain, supermarket, and mass-merchandise-store pharmacies in the U.S. between April 2001 and April 2002. At least 166 responses were needed for inclusion in the Ratings (we received as many as 6,500 responses for big chains such as Walgreens). Differences in Reader score of less than 5 points are not meaningful. The results reflect our readers' experiences, not necessarily those of the population at large.

Key numbers with a • indicate Quick Picks.

Within types, in order of reader score.



Key number	Store	Locations	Survey results			
			Reader score	Service	Speed	Information
1•	Independents	25,000 nationwide	88	●	●	●
DRUGSTORE CHAINS						
2•	Medicine Shoppe	1,000 nationwide	87	●	●	●
3	Snyder's Drug	83 in MN, WI	79	○	○	○
4	Osco Drug	380 mostly in Midwest	77	○	○	○
5	Drug Emporium	55 in MI, OH, PA	76	○	○	○
6	Brooks Pharmacy	330 in New England, NY	75	○	○	○
7	Longs Drugs	400 in West	75	○	●	○
8	Walgreens	4,050 nationwide	75	○	○	○
9	Sav-On Drugs	350 in West	74	●	●	○
10	Eckerd	2,690 mostly in Northeast, Southeast, West	71	●	●	○
11	CVS	4,100 nationwide	70	●	●	○
12	Genovese	140 in CT, NJ, metro NY	70	●	●	●
13	Rite Aid	3,400 nationwide	69	●	●	●
SUPERMARKETS						
14•	Publix	521 in South	85	●	○	●
15•	Wegmans	64 in NJ, NY, PA	82	●	●	●
16•	Winn-Dixie	690 in Southeast	82	●	○	●
17	Vons	173 in CA, NV	80	●	○	○
18	Kroger	1,117 in Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, Southeast	80	○	○	○
19	Albertsons	871 in North, Northwest, South, Southwest, West	79	○	○	○
20	King Soopers	88 in CO, NM, UT, WY	78	○	○	○
21	Giant Food	161 in DC, DE, MD, NJ, VA	78	○	●	○
22	Safeway	711 in AZ, CO, OR, WA, East	78	○	○	○
23	Stop & Shop	249 in Northeast	77	○	○	○
24	H-E-B	183 in TX	77	○	●	○
25	Giant Eagle	200-plus in MD, OH, PA, WV	77	○	○	○
MASS MERCHANTS						
26•	ShopKo	141 in Midwest, Mountain states, Pacific Northwest	83	●	●	●
27•	Target	806 nationwide	83	●	●	○

28	Kmart	1,157 nationwide	81	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
29	Costco	297 nationwide	81	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
30	Meijer	156 in Midwest	81	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
31	Fred Meyer	133 in AK, ID, OR, UT, WA	77	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
32	Wal-Mart	2,893 in all states but ND	75	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Freestanding stores only; does not include Jewel-Osco or Albertsons-Osco combination stores.

Freestanding stores only; does not include Albertsons Sav-On combination stores.

Includes Albertsons Sav-On units.

The Giant Food headquartered in Landover, Md.