

# HEALTH

## Seniors Face Cost Barrier for Cancer Meds

Steep co-payments cause prescriptions to go unfilled

Chemotherapy is now available in a pill, but if you have Medicare, you may not be able to afford it.

That's what happened to Rita Moore when she took her prescription for a medication to treat kidney cancer to her local drugstore. She was stunned when the pharmacist told her a month's supply of the pills would cost \$2,400, more than she makes.

Medicare prescription plans that cover seniors like Moore are allowed to charge steep copayments for the latest cancer drugs, which can cost tens of thousands of dollars a year.

About 1 in 6 beneficiaries are not filling their prescriptions, according to recent research that suggests a worrisome trend.

Officials at Medicare say they're not sure what happens to those patients — whether they get less expensive older drugs that sometimes work as well, or they just give up. Traditionally, chemotherapy has been administered intravenously at a clinic or doctor's office. Pills are a relatively new option that may represent the future of cancer care.

Moore, 65, was operated on in February for an advanced form of kidney cancer. As she faced a life-and-death struggle, both her cancer and kidney specialists agreed a drug called Sutent offered the best chance. It's a capsule you can take at home.

But Moore was unprepared for what happened when she went to fill her prescription.



Rita Moore looks at a photo of her son and grandchildren at her home in California. Diagnosed with advanced cancer she could not afford the prescription drug she needed to help stop the spread of the disease. (AP photo)

"I cried," said Moore, who lives in the small central California town of Corcoran. "What can you do when the only thing out there that

can maybe give you some quality of life is unaffordable? I was devastated. I didn't know what to do."

Private insurance companies that

deliver the Medicare prescription benefit say the problem is that drug makers charge too much for the medications, some of which were developed from taxpayer-funded research. The pharmaceutical industry faults insurers, saying copayments on drugs are higher than cost-sharing for other medical services, such as hospital care.

Some experts blame the design of the Medicare prescription benefit itself, because it allows insurers to put expensive drugs on a so-called "specialty tier" with copayments equivalent to 25 percent or more of the cost of the medication.

Drugs for multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis and hepatitis C also wind up on specialty tiers, along with the new anti-cancer pills. Medicare supplemental insurance — Medigap — doesn't cover those copayments.

**Cancer Resource Center** -- Providence St. Vincent Medical Center and the American Red Cross have joined forces to create the first in-hospital resource center providing books, printed material, computer access and more for individuals and families dealing with cancer. The center is open Monday through Thursday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

**Lead Poisoning Prevention** -- Learn how to protect your family from lead poisoning. Ideal for folks in live in

older homes with children or pregnant women. Qualified participants receive a free kit of safety and testing supplies. Call 503-284-6827.

**Parenting Classes** -- Newborns don't come with instruction manuals but parents and parents-to-be can learn about a variety of topics from pain and childbirth to breastfeeding to infant CPR and much more. For a schedule of events, call 503-574-6595 or visit: providence.org/classes.

### HEALTH WATCH

**Families with Mental Illness** -- A free, 12-week course for people whose family members live with mental illness is offered at Emanuel Hospital, Mt. Hood Medical Center and Providence Medical Center. The course has been described as "life-changing" by former participants. Registration is required by calling 503-203-3326.

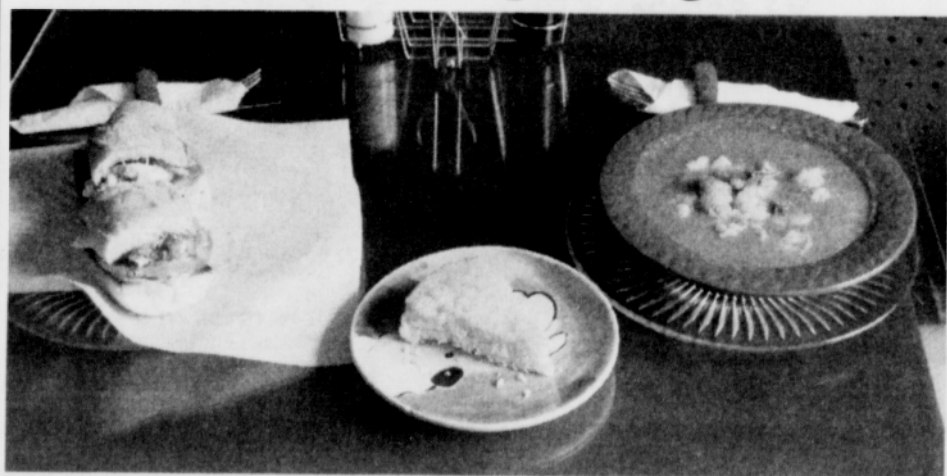
**Cholesterol Profiles** -- Get the resources to help you keep an eye on your cholesterol and other indicators of heart health. Educational material provided. For more information, call 503-261-6611.

**Bereavement Support Groups** -- Free, safe confidential group meetings for those who have experienced the death of a loved one offered on various nights and locations. For information and registration, call 503-215-4622.

**Maternity Water Workout** -- Helping new moms regain muscle tone, strength, and flexibility, all in the support and freedom of the water. Call 503-256-4000 for more information.

**Red Cross Certification** -- The Oregon Trail Chapter Red Cross now offers credits to help professionals maintain licensing or certification. For a cumulative list, visit pdxinfo.net.

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