

Access for all - Making medicines affordable in Portugal

The Portuguese National Health System (the SNS) includes a medicines' reimbursement system that covers the whole population. Under this system, the cost of the medicine is usually shared between the State and the patient. In some circumstances, the entire cost of the medicine is paid by the State.

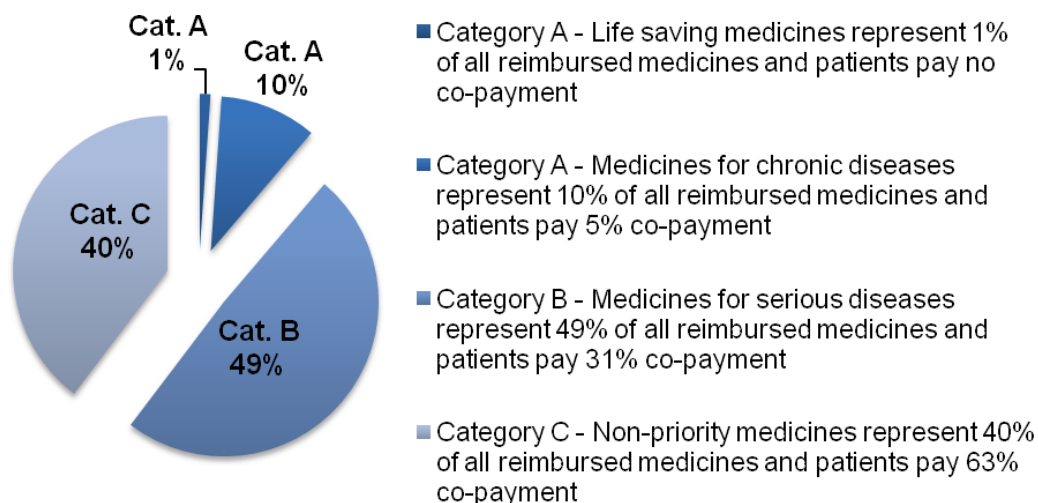
Which medicines are reimbursed in Portugal and why?

The Portuguese Medicines Agency (INFARMED) determines which medicines will be reimbursed based on the product's efficacy in treating disease and its cost. Approved medicines are included in a national positive list, called the *Prontuário*. The list applies to medicines prescribed for out-patients (outside health care facilities). Pharmaceuticals administered to in-patients at public hospitals are fully reimbursed.

Over-the-counter (OTC) products are not usually reimbursed, but may be included in the positive list if justified on the grounds of public health.

Prescription medicine prices are determined by reimbursement categories

The price a patient pays for a prescription medicine, called the co-payment, is dependent on the patient's condition/disease, the need of the patient to have that medicine for his or her daily function, and the patient's social-economic situation. The four main categories of medicines reimbursement are set as follows:



Reimbursing prescription medicines for vulnerable groups

Low-income pensioners are entitled to lower co-payment rates, including a 100% reimbursement rate for life-saving essential medicines (Category A), but also for essential medicines for chronic diseases (Category B). Since June 2009, all generic medicines prescribed to low-income pensioners have no co-payment.

Medicine prices in Portugal are still too high

Essential medicines for the treatment of serious diseases amount to nearly half of all reimbursed medicines. Patients taking these medicines must pay 31% of the product's price, which can be a considerable amount.

In spite of this universal reimbursement system, a patient survey from 2007 shows that 40% of people had some difficulty being able to afford their medicines and another 12% found the medicines they had been prescribed too expensive to buy.

Co-payments need to be reduced

Prescription medicines are still unaffordable for some people. Lower reimbursement classes only exist for low-income pensioners; other vulnerable groups are not given special consideration in the reimbursement system.

Policy makers should aim to decrease co-payments. The population should be monitored to determine which groups find medicines unaffordable and steps should be taken to implement exemptions and/or reduced co-payments for these people.

Keep promoting generic medicines

Portugal has already taken steps to promote generic medicines. Pharmacists can now voluntarily substitute a generic for an original product. Doctors are also obliged to prescribe medicines by name of the active ingredient, called the international non-proprietary name (INN), instead of by brand name. Portuguese authorities use a reference price system that favours less expensive generic medicines. By using these strategies, Portugal has increased the proportion of generics on the market by 15% in one decade.

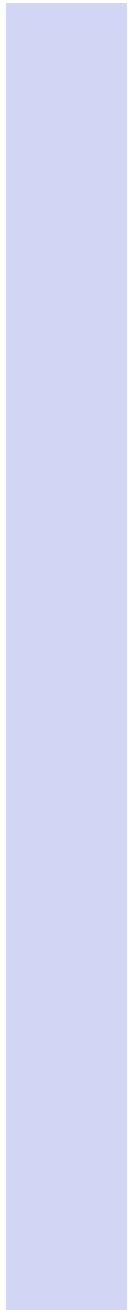
However, the prices of some generics are still high and more can be done to promote generics. Instead of voluntary substitution, the reimbursement system could offer financial incentives to promote generic substitution. Sanctions against doctors that do not comply with INN prescribing could also be introduced.

Make the reimbursement system understandable for the public

Though the Portuguese Medicines Agency (INFARMED) regularly publishes information, the reimbursement system is not fully understood by patients and consumers. Public awareness is crucial to reducing patients' co-payments and promoting access to medicines in Portugal.

This overview and analysis of the Portuguese medicines reimbursement system is based on a commissioned report "Access to Medicines in Portugal" (2009) from the Austrian Health Institute.

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