

# Food & health focus

Prescription prices vary across the UK, but you might be able to make paying easier

## Prescribing puzzles

### MEDICINES

Whether you pay for prescription medicines, and how much they cost, can seem like a lottery. It depends on where you live and the condition or illness that you have.

In Wales a prescription is free, while in Scotland you'll pay £5 from 1 April and nothing by 2011. By contrast, in England and Northern Ireland (NI) a prescription costs £6.85 – this usually increases in April but no news was out before we went to press.

If you have certain conditions, you don't pay. For example, all prescriptions are free for those with diabetes controlled by drugs.

### Medicines review

The Department of Health in England and the NI Assembly are reviewing their policies on which conditions should be exempt from prescription charges. Some decisions on these haven't changed since the 1960s. For example, the Cystic Fibrosis Trust told us: 'In 1968, people with cystic fibrosis didn't live beyond childhood and, as no children pay for prescriptions, no exemption was made. Now that the average life expectancy is 31, we believe that they shouldn't pay.'

However, the Department of Health has



Some prescription decisions haven't been reviewed for decades

confirmed that its review won't go as far as making prescriptions free for all.

A spokeswoman said: 'Eighty-eight per cent of prescription items are already dispensed free of charge [most to exempt groups such as pensioners] but to abolish charges would significantly reduce the money available for other health priorities.'

But a recent Mori survey for Citizen's Advice suggested that around 800,000 people in England didn't collect prescriptions last year due to cost. Our timeline

(below) shows that prices here have risen by more than six times since the 1950s.

We'll keep you updated about changes. You can go to the website of the Prescription Pricing Authority (PPA) – at [www.ppa.org.uk](http://www.ppa.org.uk) – to find out more about exemptions.

### Help yourself

If you do pay for prescriptions, there are ways to make it cheaper.

■ Consider prepayment certificates if you need prescriptions regularly. The annual cost is £98.70 in England and Northern Ireland (so they're good value if you have more than 14 prescriptions a year) and £48 from 1 April in Scotland (which would pay for more than nine prescriptions). Go to the PPA website for details.

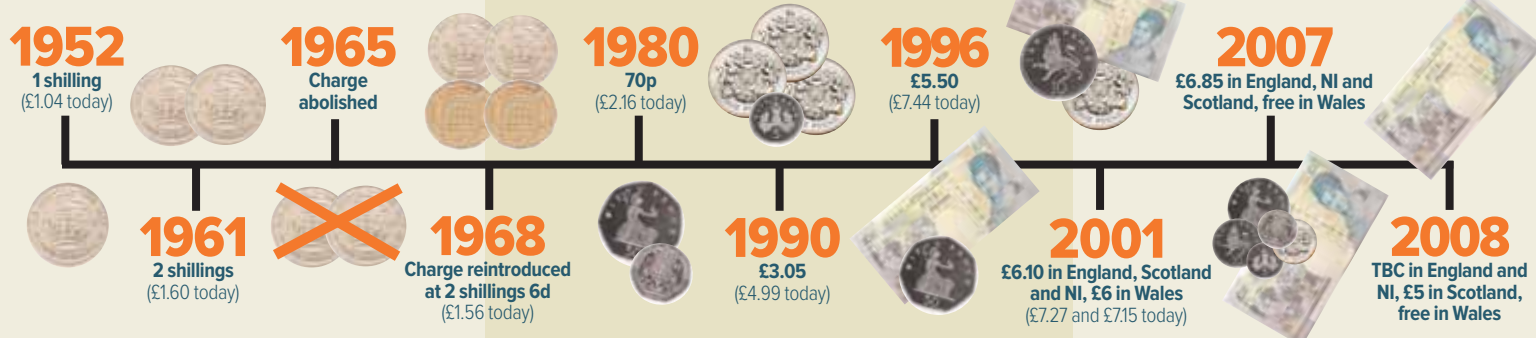
■ If your doctor prescribes a drug that's also available over the counter, check which is cheaper. Consider quantities, though, as GPs will sometimes prescribe larger amounts.

■ If a private doctor gives you a prescription, you'll generally pay full price for the drugs. Shop around, including online, for the best prices.

There are also more convenient ways to pick up prescription medication – ask for details at your surgery. Some practices will deliver prescriptions straight to a local pharmacy. And now that electronic prescriptions are being rolled out in England, Scotland and Wales, many of us will have even less running around to do.

**Check if your prescribed drug is available over the counter**

## Prescription prices over the years





**£430 million**  
contribution to English NHS from  
prescription charges in 2006-07

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH



**3,000**  
products with omega 3 launched in the  
past five years across the world

MINTEL

We investigate whether the pharmacy is as good as the fishmonger for your health

# Supplementary question

## OMEGA 3

Many of you asked about omega 3 supplements following our report last November (p16) on foods with added omega 3.

Our subsequent investigation showed how overwhelming it can be to choose from the multitude of supplements on offer.

And we also found that many manufacturers make health claims that aren't proven.

### Known benefits

Only omega 3 fatty acids found in fish – eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) – have proven health benefits, helping keep your heart healthy. They may also benefit foetal development.

But samples of supplements we bought also had claims about 'keeping joints supple and flexible', 'maintaining healthy brains', 'improved concentration' and 'important for eye function', although the evidence is insufficient. Some claims start with 'may' or 'could', but even these may be misleading.

Nutritional information claims can be confusing, too. For instance, Superdrug High Strength Omega Oils 3+6+9 is labelled only with overall omega 3 content, so we couldn't tell whether this was fish-derived EPA or DHA.

Some supplements we bought contained plant-derived omega 3 fatty acids known as alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), such as flaxseed. For instance, Vertese Omega Oils 3 6 9 uses plant sources, which it says 'may help maintain a healthy heart and supple joints' and 'healthy brain and eye function'.



**These Holland & Barrett supplements we bought offer 0.5g of fish oil per daily dose**

### OMEGA 3 SUPPLEMENTS: WHAT WE FOUND

SUPPLEMENT	PRICE (£)	COST PER WEEK (£)	RECOMMENDED DAILY DOSE ON LABEL (CAPSULES)	DAILY DOSE GIVES 0.5g OF FISH-DERIVED OMEGA 3?
<b>BOOTS</b> Brain and Health Super Strength Omega 3 Fish Oil 1,000mg	6.99 for 30	1.63	1	X
<b>EYE Q</b> Naturally-sourced Omega 3 and Omega 6 oils	7.49 for 60	5.25 for 12 weeks, 1.75 after	6 for 12 weeks, 2 after	✓ for 12 weeks X after
<b>HALIBORANGE</b> Omega-3 Fish Oil High DHA Concentration	3.99 for 30	1.86	2	X
<b>HOLLAND &amp; BARRETT</b> EPA Fish Oil Concentrate	8.99 for 100	0.63 - 1.89	1 to 3	✓ (with 2 or more)
<b>HOLLAND &amp; BARRETT</b> Omega 3, 6, 9	9.99 for 60	3.50	3	✓
<b>SEVEN SEAS</b> Extra High Strength Omega-3 Pure Cod Liver Oil	5.19 for 30	1.21	1	X
<b>SUPERDRUG</b> High Strength Omega Oils 3+6+9	7.49 for 90	0.58	1	X
<b>VERTESE</b> Omega Oils 3 6 9	3.99 for 30	0.93-1.86	1 to 2	X

Prices paid in January 2008

The body can convert small quantities of ALA into EPA and DHA, but research suggests it doesn't appear to be as beneficial as the fatty acids found in oily fish.

### Recommended intake

Even with clear information on labels, it can be hard to tell how much you need, as there's no official recommended daily amount of omega 3.

Expert opinion varies, but most advise around 0.5g (500mg) a day – or more for those who have heart conditions.

Where experts do agree, though, is that eating oily fish – at least one or two portions

a week – is better than taking supplements.

From the eight samples we bought on the high street, we looked at the labels and worked out that only two provided 0.5g of fish-derived EPA and DHA a day if taken regularly – and it's not advisable to exceed doses recommended on packaging.

Price also varied among our supplements if taken as recommended, with weekly costs ranging between 58p and £3.50.

**VERDICT** Oily fish is best for keeping your heart healthy. But if you do want to take supplements, buy those with a recommended daily dose that gives 0.5g of EPA and/or DHA.